

**THE
DANCE OF
YOUTH**

**Hermann
Sudermann**

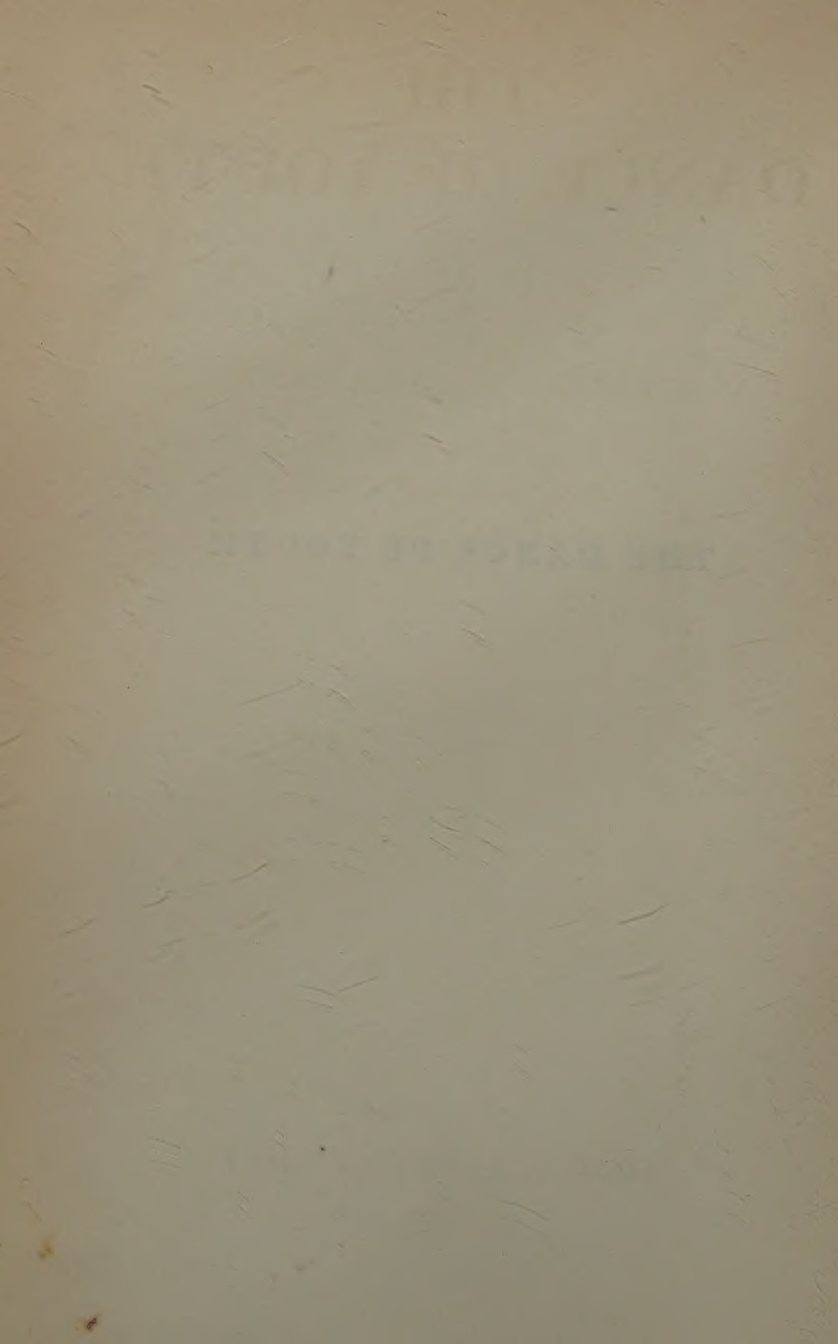
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THE DANCE OF YOUTH



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BY
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THE DANCE OF YOUTH

Chapter One

THE SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY

Yes, it was Stumpy's birthday.

The sixteenth, as the title of this chapter tells. Actually, of course, the seventeenth, if we count in the real birth-day as the first birthday. But we will stick to the usual way of reckoning, and call it the sixteenth.

Stumpy was a jolly little thing—so every one thought.

Just a trifle broad in the beam, perhaps. Her legs were too short and her calves too plump; but her ankles, happily, were as slender as they make them, so that they could easily be spanned by Gudrun's thumb and middle finger—Gudrun had the long fingers of a pianist. As for Stumpy's bust, though the girl was secretly proud of it and used to admire it every night before going to sleep, it was rather too luxuriant, rather too prominent, for the modern taste in these matters.

"Still, that won't last," said Mamma as confidently as if her own swelling bosom, which was really an out-size, had been only a transient feature of dawning womanhood.

Stumpy's throat was curved like the alabaster vase which stood on the pier-glass table, and which Herbert was fond of using as an ash-tray; it was prettily rounded over the voice-box from which those languishing but merry tones came forth into the world.

But what about the face?

Could you dignify it with such a name?

Gudrun had a face worthy to be called a "countenance." A finely modelled nose; long, upward-curving eyelashes; beautiful, sparkling eyes, iridescent, goldish-brown, brimming over with passion; and so on.

But Stumpy? Poor Stumpy had only to glance at herself in the mirror, and she would wonder that any one could bear to look at her.

She was blonde, no doubt! People admired blondes, especially among the Jews. But the fairness of her complexion was too conspicuous, too pink-and-white, most unattractive. No matter how much vinegar she drank, it would not drive the roses from her cheeks, would not give her an interesting pallor.

At most it gave her a tummy-ache.

After which her cheeks were redder than ever.

Now, Gudrun's cheeks were something to boast of. A delicate oval in shape, and with that "peach-bloom texture" one was always reading about in novels. But Stumpy felt that some special term of abuse ought to be coined for the description of her own cheeks, which were as ruddy as those of an apple and had the same chubby, childish roundness.

"Well, you've got blue eyes, haven't you?" the apologist in her would protest.

No use! Some girls had eyes of a blue that seemed to come straight out of the sky on a fine spring morning. Asta Richter had eyes like that, and knew how to use them too. But her own eyes, Stumpy thought, of a tint shading off into grey or green—a nondescript colour, in fact—were not the kind of eyes that would tempt a man to snatch a kiss when no one was looking.

Shaggy locks, too, hanging in a festoon all round her forehead. A regular frizzle-head it made of her.

What Stumpy would have liked was wavy hair. Beautiful Clytie waves, such as Gudrun brought back

from the great hairdressing and manicure establishment she visited every four weeks to have her locks washed and trimmed and curled.

It had been cruel of Mamma (who would repent it in her grave) to deny Stumpy such a head of hair as she herself possessed.

Once indeed, Stumpy had tried to get the "frizzles" straightened out, and have "waves" instead. She had not ventured into one of the big places, but had gone to an out-of-the-way hairdresser's, quite a small shop. No good! They had only laughed at her.

"My dear young lady, you must be out of your senses. Any one else would thank God every night for such a head of hair as you have. And here you come wanting me to take the curl out of it! No, no, I can't do such a thing, though it means losing a good customer."

So even that road to beauty was barred.

But these are side issues. The main point is that it was Stumpy's birthday.

Now if God has been so inconsiderate as to send one into the world towards the end of a wretched month like November, can one expect much from a birthday?

Why, yes. Earth must compensate for the remissness of heaven.

That, doubtless, was what Stumpy's parents were thinking, business worries notwithstanding. Round the sixteen candles with the flame of life in the middle the presents were laid out, more presents than Stumpy had expected.

A ball-dress from Mamma, pale-blue and silver, a dream of a dress as foretaste of yet lovelier ones she would have when she was older. A ring from Papa; a ring with a red stone, a ruby it looked like, perhaps it was only an imitation, since Papa's work gave him a

taste for imitations; and a twenty-mark note as well, being a first contribution towards the cost of the long-promised dancing lessons. Herbert's offering was a pair of suspenders in pink-and-violet silk; would be a good match for the camiknickers she was going to get, but not quite the thing for a young gentleman to give to a young lady, though he were her half-brother ten times over—still one knew Herbert's little ways. Then, last of all, from Gudrun, an ivory box (it looked like ivory, but perhaps it was only celluloid) containing a powder-puff and a lip-stick. For the moment, at any rate, these treasures seemed all that a girl's heart could desire. Sweets in plenty it need hardly be said. They were always to be had at Gottfried Lüdicke's; and, since none of the family paid any attention to them, one must suppose they were for the visitors.

Flowers, too, lots of them. Friends, evidently, had spared no expense in this matter. That spray of lilies was from Willi—lilies, if you please, in November! Kurt had sent some carnations, four big ones, not those mangy little ones that cost only thirty pfennigs apiece. The roses were Hans Joachim's tribute; long-stemmed buds, each of which would soon open out into a queen of a flower. As for the chrysanthemums, they hardly counted. No doubt Mamma had picked them up cheap at the market. Still, they made an effective background, and it would have been a pity if they had not been there.

Stumpy bubbled over with delight. She hugged her father and her mother again and again by turns. Gudrun was enthusiastically kissed thrice over. As for Herbert, who had stayed to help inaugurate the birthday (the young man was rarely at home till four in the morning), he was allowed to give her an affectionate caress.

Speaking generally, going to bed late was a habit—a “sweet” habit one might say without exaggeration—in this household. The reason will become apparent by and by. For the moment we are concerned with Stumpy’s birthday celebrations.

“Well, so that’s that,” said Herbert with a yawn. “In time, you see, even children like Stumpy grow up into sweet little girls, and then the sooner they’re married off the better. Your turn will come ere long, my pretty! It’s just a quarter to nine. I feel it in my bones that this day and this hour a year from now the front-door bell will ring, and lo and behold a suitor for your hand.”

“For shame, Herbert,” said Mamma, with a grimace of reproof which drew the powdered corners of her mouth down towards her double chin. “Don’t put such nonsense in the child’s head. No hurry for her to get married, even if she doesn’t become an artist like Gudrun. Not that I wouldn’t rather see Gudrun. . . .” She broke off with a sigh, being one of the old-fashioned mothers whose main desire in life is to get their daughters mated young.

Gudrun, who was six years older than Stumpy, and who guarded her maidenly freedom as zealously as the seraph guards Heaven’s gate, said nothing, but smiled quietly to herself. She had excellent reasons of her own for smiling!

“But there’s something else that bothers me,” the mother went on. “You’re sixteen now; and though you’re really nothing more than a baby still, you’ll soon be a young lady. I don’t think we ought to go on calling you ‘Stumpy.’”

“Why on earth not?” enquired Stumpy, much alarmed. She felt as if a thieving hand were being

stretched over the table to snatch away all her birthday presents.

"Your real name is 'Annemarie,'" Mamma continued. "Or, for short we might call you 'Annemie,' which sounds much prettier. But 'Stumpy' is the sort of name one gives to a puppy-dog. It sounds comical when applied to a girl, and might set the young men against you. They want something to respect, something they can look up to. I feel sure no one could look up to a girl called 'Stumpy.' Don't you agree with me, Gottfried?"

Her husband, who had been deep in his own thoughts (probably relating to some totally new, quite unprecedented confection), plucked at his flowing necktie, and roused himself sufficiently to answer with a distracted air: "Of course, my dear Laura, of course I'm quite of your way of thinking."

But Stumpy was far from inclined to bow, in this matter, before parental authority.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she exclaimed. "Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim have always had a great respect for me. And if any of them ever wanted to give me a kiss, well, I just let them. That works more than having a highbrow name."

Mamma shrugged her shoulders at the mention of kisses, and Gudrun smiled so patronisingly at Stumpy's naivety that the girl would have sunk into the ground from shame, had she not been sustained by a little secret of her own, one she had been cherishing since last spring.

The thought gave her courage to make a direct appeal for help: "You might put in a word for me, Gudrun!"

Gudrun smiled enigmatically. She always did that when there was any difference of opinion between her

parents, or friction between them and either of the two daughters. On these occasions she seemed to be quite aloof, as if watching a stage play. But when her mother or her father asked her advice, she gave it pithily and humorously—advice that was usually followed.

Her counsel was sought on this occasion, for Mamma looked at her enquiringly, and with all the deference due to her as the person who kept house for the family and was at the same time a budding professional singer familiar with higher circles.

Assuming a mischievous gutter-snipe air, she said: "Bless you, my children, the matter's not urgent. Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim are only hobbledehoys, and don't count. As for our little Stumpy, she's not fully fledged yet. She won't be able to play the game of modern love until she's learned the new dances. I'll bet she hasn't even found out so far, how to drink a cocktail."

Alas, this was true; so Stumpy preserved a shame-faced silence.

"I don't believe you've ever worn silk stockings yet?" queried Gudrun.

"Yes, I have," Stumpy burst out, "at my confirmation," furious that her sister should have forgotten so important a fact.

"Only black ones," rejoined Gudrun compassionately.

Having glanced at the birthday table, she said to her mother in a reproachful tone: "Seems to me that that's the chief thing wanting!"

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Frau Lüdicke with a sigh, "one can't get everything."

"I know a place where they're sold very cheap," said Gudrun consolingly, as she scrutinised her sister's

drab calves. "But to return to the subject. I think this question of her name will settle itself as soon as she goes out into the world. Meanwhile we can still call her what we've all got used to. But if she should take up some work or other, or if some young man should appear upon the scene. . . ." She turned to Herbert: "If you, for instance, were to introduce some of your friends to her. . . ."

Herbert, who had unconcernedly and drowsily been staring at his fingernails stained with cigarette juice, woke up at this.

"Rather not, thank you," he said with cool decision.

"I should like to know why not," protested Stumpy, who would have been delighted to make the acquaintance of some fine young sprigs. Gudrun was perfectly right. Willi and her other playmates were only hobledehoys after all.

"Why not?" echoed Mamma.

"My mistake," said Gudrun, beating a retreat. "I don't know any of Herbert's friends, but I don't expect they'd be altogether safe for Stumpy. She's not had enough experience."

She drew herself up, and pursed her lips, as if agreeably contemplating the wealth of her own memories.

Papa, who had continued to muse, now caught sight of the clock and looked warningly at his wife.

Hard upon nine! It was time for them both to be about their business.

Frau Lüdicke got up solemnly and rather heavily. She was a woman of literally abundant charms, with a somewhat domineering smile, and yet full of womanly sweetness—as sweet as the world over which she presided from one day to another.

Chapter Two

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE LÜDICKE FAMILY

FOR Papa was a confectioner.

Round about the lower end of the Kantstrasse, the name of Lüdicke was very well known indeed; and had the world been able to appreciate good service as it ought to be appreciated, his fame would have spread still farther afield.

He was no ordinary sweetmonger, the kind of man who lays in a stock of chocolate-creams and the like by the stone from Sarotti or Hildebrand or Riquet, to peddle them by the ounce, and make his livelihood out of the difference between wholesale and retail prices. Of course he had to sell such wares, since the public asked for them, but a man of his calibre could never be content with pettifogging traffic of that sort.

No, he was an artist.

One had only to look at him, the long, slender man whose head was bent forward a little because it was so full of ideas, whose eyes were burning with enthusiasm, whose necktie fell into such lovely folds, and whose grey hair set off his temples so splendidly—one had only to look at him, and one knew he must have the soul of an artist.

And this artist soul aspired to great altitudes. That was why he would never remain wholly dependent upon the large-scale purveyors; that was why he had struck out along a line of his own, where he was an autocrat and could give free rein to his fancy.

To begin with he had been a pastrycook, and before

the war Lüdicke's, in the dressmakers' quarter, was just the place for a lad to take his lass for a snack when they were spending an afternoon together. Often enough you arranged to meet your girl there, as many of us can still recall. Then came the lean years, when flour was rationed, sugar was replaced by glucose, and cream was no more than a pious memory.

Most of the other pastrycooks carried on as best they could, getting through the time of stress with the aid of such humbugging devices as egg-powder, substitute-nuts, and some sort of sweetened lather. But that wouldn't do for Papa. He simply closed down.

The Lüdicke's themselves could hardly tell how they lived through the evil days. The underground trade in Polish eggs (Herbert sent them along from the eastern front, and sometimes a few chickens as well), Danish butter, and Swiss tinned milk—trade to which the good mother had turned her fat fingers—was certainly not enough to furnish a livelihood.

Stumpy had been too little for those hard times to have left much impression on her mind. But what remained was the memory of how she had been taken to a corner shop in the Kantstrasse. Here there were no end of fine things to eat, and now and again she had pinched from the shelves some trifle to take to her school friends.

It was when the family was installed in their new premises that Papa's imagination began to sprout new wings. His eyes were open and his thoughts were busy, and whenever he got wind of anything exceptionally appetising, he would try his hand at making it, so that before long (duly ticketed with a price) it would find a place in one or other of the two windows that picturesquely flanked the door of the corner shop.

His creative ambition grew with exercise.

Foreign comestibles were frightfully expensive in German money; there were heavy import duties super-added to the prime cost; and the necessary formalities ate up a tremendous amount of time. But once he had got hold of the goods, he would have a shot at making them himself, and would do it so carefully that none of his customers would know they were not getting the genuine article. There was no reason to be afraid because of trifling differences in flavour, seeing that a fine palate is rare; the difficulty was that many of these articles were so carefully protected by pictorial wrappings and elaborate trademarks, that the counterfeiter, or the imitative artist let us say, ran a serious risk of getting himself jailed. The position would have been desperate, had there not been a number of ostensibly imported articles which would be exposed for sale quite simply, without any cartons or what not, but merely ticketed. It would never occur to the customer to suspect there was anything wrong with these.

The famous sugar-almonds made by Zeller of Vienna; the Marienbad cream-almond-orange pastilles; French candied cherries; Roman plums—a man must be a fool if he couldn't make just as good in his own workshop.

That word "workshop" brings us to the heart of things.

What use would it have been that Papa had in youth roamed over the world as a confectioner's assistant, had learned in Vienna to make pineapple drops, and in Paris the celebrated almond rock, if he had not been ready now to turn his knowledge to account? He was not the man to let it all run to seed. Besides, he had not forgotten the things he had used to sell to the young ladies in the dressmakers' quarter. He was in the mind to revive these arts, and to show the worthy

Charlottenburgers with what poor stuff their old-established confectioners and pastrycooks were supplying them in the way of "Moor's heads," cream-puffs, "Lucca tears," and the like.

That was why he had supplemented his confectionery business with a pastrycook's, so that the servant-maids, on their way to their day's work, could buy the most tempting dainties for their masters' and mistresses' breakfast.

For this, however, he had to turn his own hand to night work, inasmuch as the law now forbade the employment of assistants before six in the morning. It was necessary for him to curtail his sleep to a minimum, if his customers were to have Vienna rolls with their early coffee.

This did not mean, however, that Papa's business was flourishing like a green bay tree. On the contrary! Toil as hard as he might, thinking out new delicacies—the world was slow to prize them as it should have done; and often things grew stale unnoticed in his shop windows, when they ought to have worked a revolution in the taste of Berlin.

To aggravate his troubles, he had no helper and no prospect of a successor. Herbert, who might have seemed designed by fate for both positions, was no longer in question. Lüdicke's stepson had become far too genteel.

Herbert Hartung, indeed, almost deserves a chapter to himself.

When after the Armistice he had come back from the war as an eighteen-year-old lieutenant in the air force, he had shown no inclination to enter his stepfather's business, though from the time of his mother's second marriage it had been taken as a matter of course that he would do so when he grew up. The

notion of such a career did not harmonise with his brand-new gentility. Yet there did not seem to be any other opening.

To begin with he had done his bit in the streets, fighting vigorously against the communists. When, towards midnight their account had been settled, he did not even trouble to change his clothes or to brush the mud off his boots, but hastened, just as he was, to accept one of the invitations which the well-to-do bourgeois (whose daughters were crazy to be dancing once more) showered on the young officers returning from the front.

Then, at home, after he had had his sleep out, and while awaiting another call to arms, he danced with his own shadow.

At midday sometimes, when Stumpy came home from school, he would play all sorts of tricks with her. This is not to say that he initiated her into the new dances. She was still only a little girl, much too small to be his partner in these.

But, humming an appropriate tune he would swing her off the ground and whirl her through the air, would enthrone her on his shoulder, would toss her towards the ceiling and catch her in his arms as she fell.

Stumpy enjoyed all this hugely, and delighted in the pretence of flying. She was never in the least afraid, having absolute confidence in his dexterity. Her only trouble was that he might not think her nimble enough.

So it went on month after month—until at last the serious problems of life had to be faced.

For there could be no question about it, our young friend's ship was not sailing through smooth waters.

Volunteer corps; banking business; volunteer corps again—and then, when the inflation of the currency was nearing its climax, mysterious activities which some-

times enabled him to net millions of almost worthless marks, and sometimes seemed likely to land him behind prison bars.

The upshot was that, when Papa opened the new shop, the idea of taking him into the business had become ludicrous.

By now Herbert was a distinguished gentleman!

He had his clothes made at Hoffman's. His hair was cut in the latest fashion. His well-fitting shoes set off his silk socks so admirably, the edge of these shoes caressed his ankles so lovingly, that you would have sworn he must be one of the gilded youth of Berlin.

But, alas, his income was not in keeping with his decorative exterior. Though he had with little difficulty become a member of one of the most exclusive gaming-clubs, this institution could not be expected to keep him in funds. The working capital for an evening there (were it no more than twenty gold marks) had often to be secretly cadged from his mother before he could set forth in a taxi upon his adventures.

Then the police thrust their noses into the affair and the gaming club was closed down. A second was started, and was likewise raided. A third went the way of all flesh. Obviously, our young hero had to cast about for some new sphere of activity.

Peacetime air-service was still in its infancy. He did not play tennis well enough to make a career in that field. Croupiers were no longer in demand. In poverty-stricken Germany it really seemed as if a young gentleman could find no easy and lucrative work befitting his station.

By good luck at this juncture he called to mind how, before getting into the air force, he had at the front done very well as driver of a motor lorry.

A good few officers, nowadays, were making a livelihood as taxidriers. Under the rose, of course, wearing a high-collared overcoat, but not regarded with contempt by any sometime comrade who might chance to hire the cab and recognise an old acquaintance. The fare would know well enough that it might be his turn another day, and, in shaking hands with the driver, would feel that perhaps he was shaking hands with his own future.

Besides, it didn't need to be a taxi. With luck, one might get a private job, and, as a gentleman chauffeur, one would in a sense become the chief person in a richly provided establishment. Dreaded by the boss, made eyes at by the lady of the house, petted by the daughters—one was like a fairy prince, on the way to marriage or to love without marriage.

Herbert's luck, however, was not quite so rosy as this, for the glittering Buick which was at length entrusted to his care belonged to a bachelor.

A professional bachelor, so to say.

Within the last two years Dr. Gilbert M. Shadow had made himself a position as one of the most sought-after dentists in the West End; and there could be no doubt that he owed much of his success with the fair sex (the bulk of his patients were ladies of fashion) to the fact that he could make the best use of his undoubted charms without being spied upon by a jealous wife.

Still, though Herbert's employer was a bachelor, there were some very definite advantages attaching to his new job. Above all, his time was mostly his own during the daylight hours. For health's sake, Shadow preferred to walk to the consulting room in the morning, and he went on working till late in the afternoon. The only call upon Herbert during this period was to

drive his employer to the Eden Hotel for luncheon.

The chauffeur, therefore, could get his sleep out in the mornings, and he needed it, for his duties kept him up till well on into the small hours.

The amazing thing was the way Dr. Shadow's energies were sustained, though he went to bed so late too. The American was no longer young, and gave himself no chance to recuperate like Herbert, for he began to see patients every day at nine.

As far as Herbert was concerned, the main thing was that—having to clean the car, oil up, and so on, when he got back to the garage—he seldom reached home till four in the morning. At this hour he often encountered his stepfather, who was about to begin the day's work in the cellar that had been transformed into a bake-house. Four was early enough to start upon the Vienna rolls for his customers' breakfasts; but sometimes the good man would stay up the whole night when he wanted to make a batch of "genuine Parisian petits fours" or of the equally genuine Marienbad cream-almond-orange pastilles.

By noon, Herbert would be up and about again. After tub, massage, and manicure, after going through some dance-steps to limber himself up, he would with conqueror's stride—his hat set well back on his head, and his gloves unbuttoned in accordance with the latest decree of fashion—make his way to the garage, there to indue the creaking leather coat and breeches which served as livery during his hours of duty.

What happened then would have been a complete secret to his people had it not been that occasionally the smart automobile would pull up in front of the paternal sweet-shop, and Herbert would descend in order to supply himself with a pound of the best chocolates for his private uses.

When he swaggered into the shop on these occasions, with his close-fitting light-yellow headdress, his polished cape, and his leggings that looked like the golden greaves of a warrior chief in ancient Hellas, he was if possible even more stylish than when he was rigged out as a gentleman, so that Mamma, enthroned behind the counter, was wont to contemplate him with rapture.

So much for Herbert. Now, what about Gudrun?

We have already made her acquaintance, but, like her half-brother, she still seems shrouded in mystery.

Stumpy thought so, at any rate, when with an envious clutch she took her sister's letters from the postman (the second delivery in most cases, long after Papa and Mamma had gone to work); or when she had to interrupt Gudrun's practice by saying: "A gentleman who won't give his name wants to speak to you on the telephone."

Gudrun, hastening into the passage to answer the call, would shut the door of the room behind her, leaving Stumpy to reflections which were apt to find expression in a sigh, and in the exclamation, "Lucky girl!"

For the young man who was still so often in Stumpy's thoughts could not ring her up on the telephone. He did not even know her number. He knew nothing at all about her. He had vanished for ever. Besides, even he really belonged to Gudrun.

The elder girl spent her time as follows. Till two in the afternoon she was busy at home. She helped Lina in the housework, made up the accounts, practised her singing, gave music lessons, and had time left over to keep an eye upon Stumpy's shorthand studies.

But as soon as the midday meal was over, she took her departure, with her vanity-bag, her umbrella, and her roll of music.

After that, there was no news of her at home for a long while. Good reason for that, no doubt! What with the music lessons she gave and the singing lessons she took (the latter were only made possible by the former), the hours flew by on wheels. Sometimes, however, she would 'phone: "In case a gentleman should ring me up, tell him he'll find me at So-and-so's, if he'll be good enough to come along."

When supper time drew near, she would return. Having given the girl a hand in the kitchen, she was ready to welcome her parents when they got home after shutting up shop. During the meal she would talk to them about domestic or business affairs, for they seldom did anything without consulting her.

Towards eight, she would grow restless, would glance at her wrist-watch, and a moment afterwards would jump up, to vanish once again.

One evening she would have a lesson to give; another, she must go to the literary circle, where there was an important lecture at which her presence was absolutely indispensable; next day it would be a concert or a play, for which some one had sent her tickets. In a word, her desire to improve herself was so overwhelming that often enough she would get home quite as late as Herbert.

If Mamma, who was always a trifle afraid of her elder daughter, should venture at the breakfast table to put in a word of remonstrance about these untimely hours, or should hint a desire for information, Gudrun would answer without heat that after her other engagements she had gone to a friend's for an hour or two of dancing, which was a harmless amusement surely.

Nothing more was said, as a rule; but once, shortly after Stumpy's birthday, Papa, on the way down to

his workshop at four in the morning, had encountered her on the doorstep, singing, with a cigarette in her mouth—and it seemed to him that such behaviour transgressed the limits of reasonable modernity.

At breakfast, though in general he was the mildest-mannered man in the world, he began to give her a regular tongue-lashing. What sort of a way was that to behave? Did she think that a girl in a respectable household could be allowed to carry on in such a fashion? And so forth.

She sat there pouting just a little, but with unruffled forehead, and the vestige of a condescending twinkle in her eyes, while Stumpy, in a flutter, was thinking: "I wonder how she'll wriggle out of this fix!"

For a good while she held her peace, being content to smile at the raging of the storm. But when Papa, carried away by the exuberance of his own wrath (as habitually kindly men are apt to be when the dam has burst), began to bleat about "having to take orders" and about "forbidding her the house," she thought it time to put in a word or two.

"Look here, my dears," she said, speaking to both parents at once, "if this had happened about thirty years ago—to you, Mummy darling, let us suppose—there would have been much stronger language flying about the room: 'disreputable girl!' or 'dissolute creature!' or 'abandoned wretch!' or what not. But to-day, Papa, though you're in no end of a wax, you don't let yourself go to that length. If you did, you would feel frightfully out of date. 'Heavy father,' ridiculously stagey—you know! As it is, what you've actually said is rather silly, to put the best face on the matter."

"How dare you . . . ?" he began wrathfully to exclaim.

Gudrun stroked his arm appeasingly.

"Now then, Dad," she interrupted, "do let's take things quietly. Keep the lid on, whatever you do. If by living in the way you complain of I were letting my art go to pot; if, at these dances, anything (the heat of the room, the liquor, the tobacco smoke) were doing harm to my voice; why then, you would have good cause for reading me a lecture, and I hope I should be duly grateful. But the fact is that it's all good for me, excellent training for the hardships of an artistic career. If you doubt me, go and ask my singing teacher how I'm getting on. Often enough, when I've been out on the loose like last night, I feel next morning vigorous enough to start cutting down trees; I feel like Sudermann's Magda, who was so famous, Mummy, when you were my age. Besides, with it all, don't I look after the house properly? Don't you always find a good dinner ready for you when you come home in the middle of the day? Is there ever anything wrong with the household accounts? Don't I earn good money by giving music lessons, and doing any odd job of a paying sort that comes along my way, so that I needn't ask you for an allowance? What more can you want?"

Both elders still looked censorious. Each of them seemed prepared to deliver a homily full of wise saws and ancient instances, but Gudrun would not give them a chance.

"Morality!" she went on contemptuously. "Traditional morality! The morality that safeguards family life! My good children, that doesn't cut any ice now. If it were not for the presence of Stumpy, whose virginal innocence must be respected for a little while yet, I should be speaking much more plainly. But, even so, perhaps I can be plain enough. What really

matters is that one should live one's life. And one can, these days. Oughtn't we to rejoice that we need no longer let our faculties wither unused; that nothing human need remain foreign to us; that we can try out all things, to-day in one direction, to-morrow in another, but always and always on ourselves? These are delights which nothing else on earth can come near. Compared with them, virtue is chaff in the wind. If the expected husband won't take me as I am, he can do the other thing; if he doesn't like it, he can lump it, and I shall put out my tongue at him. But my advice to you is, don't worry about me. I know my own business. None of my admirers will make a fool of me. Plain living and high thinking offer no attractions to me. Cool head and hot hands are more to my taste. You just let me alone. I shall go my own way, and, without stopping too long, shall pick the flowers on either side of the path. Life's a fine thing, if you know how to live it. Give me a kiss, both of you, and finish!"

She gave her father a couple of butterfly kisses on the nose and forehead, and then snuggled up against her mother's left cheek.

The upshot was that, in spite of themselves, they joined in her merry laughter.

Chapter Three

STUMPY'S LOST LOVE

STUMPY had listened to the foregoing discussion open-mouthed, and with a palpitating heart.

She would very much have liked to know what it was that her sister had left unsaid for her sake; but, even so, what she had heard amounted to a revelation. Unfortunately, however, this revelation had no bearing on her own possibilities. She felt that she was still too callow, and she was sure she would always remain too stupid, to follow in her glorious elder's footsteps.

Nothing better was open to her than a humdrum and ordinary existence; a commercial-school training for a typist's position, with some sort of secretarial job in the offing as soon as her shorthand was good enough. She would earn a pretty fair salary then, and be able to pay her parents something for her keep.

But that was still in the clouds. She had a lot more to learn yet, and book-keeping by double entry was a great stumbling-block to her.

The post she had in mind as soon as she was competent was that of private secretary to the general manager of some great business enterprise, a man who would make her his confidant in respect of his world-shaking plans; or perhaps she would be lucky enough to be engaged by a celebrated author, who would talk over his projected books with her, and would allow her to stay on as friend and counsellor when working hours were over.

She pictured him as an elderly gentleman with a great bush of silvery hair, and blue eyes flashing with

the fires of inspiration. He would love her as if she were his own daughter, and with an affectionate hand she would smooth away the wrinkles of weariness from his brow.

Meanwhile she must stick to her work and improve her general knowledge, so that she might become thoroughly competent. With this end in view, she borrowed from the municipal library some works on the history of art, enriched with reproductions of pictures and with architectural illustrations. She also read the famous novels and poems of which mention was made in the literature class. The history of philosophy was not forgotten; but her excursion into this domain ended with the romantic legend of Empedocles, whose thirst for knowledge led him to throw himself into the blazing crater of Etna.

She felt sure she would never seek a death so horrible as that. Not even as a refuge from the miseries of an unhappy love-affair. There were less dreadful ways of killing oneself. One need only turn on the gas in the bathroom geyser, or take an overdose of veronal. Either of these would be painless.

Still, there was no need for such expedients at the moment, for she had not been troubled with the pangs of love since that time last winter.

To begin with, she had conceived a passion for the violinist who lived on the other side of the court. Sometimes he practised at the open window, and then (hidden by the blind) she would stand watching him, and drinking in the music. He had a wife already, so there could be no thought of a future union. All she would do was to put a little posy of violets in the key-hole of his front-door now and again, and let her heart yearn for him in silence.

At that time her thoughts had turned a good deal

towards the gas in the bathroom, until for her he was utterly swept out of existence by the great experience whose convulsions had not yet wholly subsided.

In actual fact (as previously mentioned) the love-affair had not been hers at all, but Gudrun's!

This was how it had happened.

One day Gudrun had said: "I say, Stumpy, I've got a date with a man this afternoon, and I don't know where he lives. The trouble is that I can't meet him, for I've got another date at the same hour, made much earlier, which I'd forgotten when I fixed up this one. But he's a nice chap, and I don't want to give him the nettle. I wish you would just trot along, and when you see him"—Gudrun gave a pretty full description of her admirer—"make a little curtsey and tell him the young lady he's expecting can't come, and would he ring her up on the 'phone to-morrow morning. Give him our number, of course."

The commission seemed an easy one, but Stumpy was in a frightful stew about it all the same. When, in the early gloaming of March, she saw the man she was to give the message to strolling up and down the Savignyplatz, her first impulse was to return home at once, without speaking to him. He was slender and distinguished-looking, though not very smartly dressed; he held three roses in one of his hands; and he turned in his toes a little in the way professional riders often do. She stood at one of the tramway-halts, as if waiting for a car. A considerable time sped by.

Then something wonderful happened.

He had walked past her several times. Now he suddenly stopped in front of her, took off his hat in greeting, and said: "My dear young lady, I'm waiting for some one and so are you, for if you weren't you wouldn't let all the street-cars depart without you like

this. What if we were to join forces, and thus save ourselves from being bored to death?"

How could she explain? If she were to say: "But it really is you I've been waiting for," he would laugh in her face. So she answered bashfully: "Just as you like."

"Good! Then my advice is that we both forsake this stricken field and make for the Tiergarten, where we can talk to our heart's content."

Thereupon he drew her hand within his arm, and five minutes later they were walking like old acquaintances past the Academy of Arts and into the Tiergarten, where by now it was quite dark.

She trembled to think what a humbug she was, and she trembled for other reasons as well, but she kept tight hold of the roses which he had given her as they came away from the tramway-halt. These were treasures beyond compare, for this was her first love adventure.

"You seem only just grown up," said he. "I should guess you're not seventeen yet."

"Not yet sixteen," she answered.

That made him thoughtful, and he went on: "Then I ought not to be walking with you here. But you needn't be afraid. No harm shall come to you."

"I'm not afraid," rejoined Stumpy. But she was still trembling.

Then he asked her about her parents, whether she had any brothers and sisters, and about her life in general. She fibbed, of course, to the best of her ability, being determined not to let him know the circumstances which had led to their meeting; but when he wanted some information about the man she had been expecting at the tramway-halt, she could not invent a fable which would be likely to go down.

"No," she said, "I won't tell you anything. It's such a silly business that it's not worth talking about. I've never really been in love yet, for the boys I know don't count."

Thus she turned the conversation towards Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim, and she went on to speak of her school life and of what she and her girl playmates were used to chatter about.

He listened to every word, without interruption, stroking her hand gently from time to time in token of appreciation.

When she had finished her account of herself, he said: "This is all very sweet and touching; and it is fragrant with innocence. But take stock of yourself once more. Your pulses beat so quickly that you must have had your feelings awakened before this."

"What do you mean?" she asked, pretending not to understand, and glad the darkness hid her blushes.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Open confession is good for the soul. Tell me about your first love-affair."

What could she do but inform him about her neighbour the violinist, and of how much suffering her passion for this man had caused her, partly because of the way it had been pent up, and partly because the object of her affections was already married.

Once more he let her have her say out, and when she had finished they continued to pace forward in silence through the darker and less frequented alleys. In one of these, he pointed to a bench and said: "It's a fine, warm evening. Let's sit down here for a little, child; then we shall get to know more of one another."

She made no objection, for her anxiety had vanished. She had no return of it when he put his arm round her and drew her gently to his side.

She longed to see his face, but in the darkness it was no more than a blur; she could just make out his nose in profile as a vague triangle beneath the brim of his slouch hat, could see the outline of lips and of a vigorous chin.

He spoke once more, and his voice came to her ears sweet and low but clear, like the notes of a distant bugle.

"I have learned quite a lot about you, now; whereas you know nothing about me as yet."

"But I want to, so much!" she exclaimed, feeling that he was going to tell her what was of more interest than anything else in the world.

"I'm a student," he began; "at the College of Agriculture. So really, you see, I've no time to make love! But yesterday it happened that the term examination was just finished, and I'd done awfully well in it, and was as pleased as Punch. Coming away in the tram, I was sitting opposite a pretty girl, and I laughed out loud at my own thoughts, in sheer good humour. She laughed sympathetically, and naturally we struck up an acquaintance."

"So that's how she does it!" thought Stumpy, but feeling that she herself would never become smart enough to seize such an opportunity.

"I was to meet her this evening, and she's left me in the lurch. Not that that bothers me, though she was extraordinarily good-looking, for it's brought me you instead. And now confidence for confidence. You really must tell me whom you were waiting for."

Shame overwhelmed her, so that she craved for instant flight.

"I can't, I can't!" she whispered, hiding her face on his shoulder.

He tightened his clasp, and she soon felt at ease,

resting there in his arms, warm, sheltered, at home; her one wish that this might last for ever.

"Oh, well," he said softly after a time, "if it's so difficult, I won't press you, but will wait till you tell me on your own. For tell me you will some day, take my word for it."

"Some day?" she enquired, drawing herself away from him in alarm. "Are we to see one another again?"

"Why, of course," he answered. "When a man comes across such a perfect darling as you are, he's not likely to let her slip right out of his life. I'll make a note of your telephone number, so that I can ring you up."

Here was a new source of terror. What if Gudrun were to answer the telephone and to recognise his voice?

"No, that will never do," she stammered. "It's not private enough. We must make some arrangement here and now."

"To-morrow, same place, same time," he suggested.

"Quite out of the question, too," she demurred, with increasing anxiety. Gudrun had told her that lovers, when one or other of them had found it impossible to keep an assignation and when they had no means of getting in touch, made it a rule to go to the appointed place at the same hour next day, on the chance of meeting.

Suppose Gudrun were to do this, matters would be in a fine pickle!

So an appointment was fixed up for next day at the Tiergarten railway station, where there would be shelter should it happen to be raining. Then they parted.

Stumpy passed a wonderful night. Gudrun was out

when she got home, so she was able to let her dreams run their course.

She was no longer inclined to reproach herself, for Gudrun had no lack of admirers. A dozen presented themselves at the merest sign. But Stumpy herself had never had a lover before. Not a real one, that is, seeing that Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim didn't amount to a row of pins.

But how was she going to fob her sister off? Better pretend to be asleep when Gudrun came home. In the end no pretence was needed for by that time Stumpy was sleeping soundly.

Next morning things passed off easier than she had expected. Gudrun looked rather annoyed at the news that the young man she had made a date with had never turned up, but her elastic spirits soon revived. In the great lottery of love, one must expect to draw a blank now and again.

All day, Stumpy was as if under a spell. She had a lover, a veritable lover! And she was not yet sixteen!

At nightfall she was at the appointed spot, the tramway-halt in front of the Tiergarten railway station, looking as unconcerned as possible, but her eyes fixed on the clock.

She started violently when she heard the bugle-tones of his voice, as he greeted her with the words: "Good evening, little lady!"

So he had really come. Up till the last moment, she had been afraid that he wouldn't. At first she hardly dared to glance up at him; and when she at length did so she saw that he was looking grave, much graver than his face had seemed in her memory of it.

Nor did he take her arm, but walked sedately beside her as if they had been strangers.

He spoke of the weather, saying that it was un-

usually warm for early spring; jolly weather for walking. The small talk of a casual acquaintanceship.

"What's he find wrong with me?" thought the poor child. "Of course I'm not good enough for him!"

But by the time it had grown quite dark, he seemed to thaw a little, asked her what she had been doing with herself since they parted, and whether she hadn't found it difficult to get out for a second evening without attracting suspicion.

Her answers were brief and confused, for she could think of nothing but this: "Why doesn't he make me take his arm as he did yesterday?"

Suddenly he pulled up short and said: "Do you know where we are?"

She looked round enquiringly, but was puzzled by his question. He answered it himself, saying:

"Why, there's our bench."

Yes, there it was.

And he had said "our" bench. That little word must surely mean that he was not so aloof from her as she had feared.

He took her by the hand and guided her to the seat. But when he sat down beside her he left a little space between them, as if he had forgotten that yesterday she had had her head resting on his shoulder.

Her heart was beating furiously as she asked herself: "What will happen now?"

He began: "My dear child, it was very wrongheaded of me to speak to you yesterday and to ask you to come for a walk with me. A good many people would say it was positively criminal. Beyond question it would hardly fall short of a crime if I were to go on as I have begun. You are the purest, the sweetest, the most innocent girl I have ever known. What is more, you are only a child. However carefully I were to

respect and honour your innocence (as, of course, I should), I should bring bitter pain into your life if I did not break off our friendship. You would make a habit of meeting me, would perhaps fall in love with me."

"As if I were not head over ears in love with him already," thought poor Stumpy.

"You would sacrifice on my account the best years of your youth, and in the end nothing would come of it."

Stumpy's pride was wounded, so that she burst out with: "Do you suppose I'm thinking only of catching a husband?"

"Of course that never entered my head. But for my part, if I want to make you mine, if I want such a darling as you are for my own, I have to think about the possibility of being your husband. . . . I lay awake half the night wondering what was to become of us. Well, nothing can become of us. Absolutely nothing. We are both of us poor. And I have obligations to fulfill, duties towards my people, the need by hook or by crook to get money together to buy back a piece of land which used to belong to us. That's why I mustn't indulge in such a luxury as falling in love. All the same, I've fallen in love with you, little one; and if I were to go on meeting you, I should love you more passionately day by day."

At these words Stumpy began to cry from mingled joy and pain.

Hearing her sobs, what could he do but fold her in his arms, and caress her even more tenderly than he had done the evening before?

Now, though she continued to sob as her head lay on his shoulder, it was from happiness unalloyed. What greater happiness could there be than to snuggle

down there and weep, reviving the delight of yesterday's embrace.

He stroked her cheek, fondled her ear, let his fingers play gently over her mouth and the side of her nose.

Never had she felt anything so exquisite. It was like being brushed by an angel's wing.

When she had composed herself a little, he resumed: "Look here, my darling child—isn't it strange, I don't even know your name yet—when I was lying awake last night and thinking about you it was borne in upon me that after to-day we must never, never, see one another again."

Stumpy gave a violent start. "Never see one another again?" she questioned imploringly.

"Never again," he answered. Now his voice did not sound like a bugle, but like a hammer striking a rock.

It seemed futile to protest or to plead. All she could do was to fling her arms round his neck, as she had been used to do with Papa, and to press her cheek against his, just to get as close to him as possible.

The kiss that followed seemed to come of its own accord. Neither of them could have told you which of them it was whose lips first sought the other's.

Stumpy drank in this kiss as if she had discovered the very fountain-head of her existence. It was something utterly obvious, and yet at the same time it was a miracle. Her feeling was: "Life can never again be so lovely as this."

She drank it in and drank it in until he gently thrust her away, stood up, and said: "We must be going."

Then the world came suddenly to an end, and she was faced with a black and horrible vacancy.

Into the vacancy she stepped boldly forward, pressing up close to his side—for there was no longer any question of maintaining a decorous distance. She was still hoping that he would mitigate his determination, and would allow a meeting from time to time at least.

But he gave no sign of relenting. When the lights of the Zoo showed between the bare branches of the trees, he pulled up short and said: "We'll bid farewell to one another here, child. Farther on, when we reach the crowded streets we must part like strangers. I don't know your name, nor you mine, and we've only seen one another in the twilight, so that we are scarcely likely to recognise one another if chance brings us together again."

"I shall recognise him in heaven," thought Stumpy, but she said nothing.

"Besides, when my student days are over I shall be leaving Berlin, and may never come back here. Since agriculture's to be my profession, there'll be nothing to bring me here, especially if I only become a land-steward, or get some other one-horse job of the kind. We mustn't expect to meet again in this world."

"No matter what he says," she thought, "I shall follow him and find out where he lives." But she naturally kept this notion to herself.

When he took her in his arms once more in parting, she was very little perturbed, for her mind was full of a desperate scheme.

Then they moved on from this secluded path towards the roads that are always thronged with wayfarers.

But just before entering a well-lighted street he halted again.

"There's one more thing I should like to ask you, since it will make it easier for me if you'll tell me. I

want to know your Christian name. I must have a name to think of you by."

She might have answered "Annemarie," or "Anne-mie" for short. But that would not have been telling him her real name. Every one who was fond of her used the pet name of "Stumpy."

It was a joy to let him know that this was what she was called, for doing so brought him into the circle of her intimates.

"Stumpy" he repeated in low tones. Obviously he understood why she had preferred to tell him her pet name rather than her baptismal name, for his voice showed that he was moved no less than amused. He asked no further question.

A moment later, they were in the busy stream of passers-by.

They walked side by side for a few more paces, and then he suddenly exclaimed: "Good-bye."

Without shaking hands, he ran forward as if the devil were at his heels, and in a moment he had disappeared.

She wanted to call after him, or better still to run after him as she had planned, but voice and limbs were as if paralysed.

That was the end of her first love affair, her first real love affair.

Or no, not the end by any means. For weeks and weeks she thought of little else but him. She dreamed of him at night. She prayed for him before she went to sleep and when she awoke in the morning. It was a surprise to her to find how devout she had become.

Walking to her classes or on her way back from them, she would continually find herself, half unconsciously, going out of her way to pass through the Savignyplatz, in the secret hope of meeting him there.

Sometimes she would actually go as far as the College of Agriculture and loiter near the door for as long as she dared. There were always plenty of people going in and coming out, but he was never among them. No sign of him even when the new term began.

She gave him up for lost, and with the coming of summer she gradually slipped back into the old routine.

But the glow of happiness persisted. She had had a great and beautiful experience, and she felt that the memory of it would endure till the end of her life.

She would have liked to confide in her sister, but in the circumstances that was impossible. Besides, it was too sacred to talk about.

None the less, Gudrun's way of looking at things became a model for her. The elder girl's self-confidence exercised so strong an influence on the younger that Stumpy could not fail to adopt Gudrun's ideals, though she was far from having a clear-cut picture of these.

Thus it came to pass that Gudrun's statement of her own attitude, in answer to Papa's scolding, was a revelation to Stumpy—a revelation of the way in which one ought to behave when love came into one's life.

For the moment, indeed, there was little time to think about love.

Not even for Gudrun.

Christmas was drawing near, and the festive season made special claims upon all the Lüdickes.

From nine in the morning both the girls had to take their places behind the counter, in order to give a hand to their parents and the two assistants.

Such had been the rule for years.

The whole place was transmogrified at Christmas, so that the shop was barely recognisable.

In the windows, and on the shelves inside, all sorts of highly decorative and tempting articles had taken the place of the customary wares.

There were gingerbread cakes galore, hailing from various sources. There were Thorn "Katharinchen," Aix "printen," Basle titbits, Liegnitz bombs, and so on, and so on—Thorn, Aix, Basle, and Liegnitz by courtesy, for nearly all of them were the outcome of Papa's nocturnal labours. So were the marzipan hearts, wheels, and stars, with crenellated borders, and stickily encrusted with candied fruit, though they professed to come from Königsberg. But most of the goods devoid of sugar-icing, brightly coloured though they were, were not of Lüdicke's making. To save time and trouble they had been ordered wholesale from Lüdbeck, so their labels at any rate were truthful for once.

Then there were manifold splendours to deck Christmas trees withal: apples, pears, flowers, champagne bottles, notebooks, cigars, powder boxes, pencils, butterflies—such at least were the outward shapes of these articles gleaming with tinsel and imitation gold-foil; but within they were solid chocolate, well calculated to renew the Christmastide indigestion when the tree should be stripped at the New Year.

There were toy-beasts, too, looking like enough to those sold in toyshops, but their bodies were boxes filled with chocolate creams. There were storks and dogs and roaring bears and baaing lambs—a whole Noah's ark full of creatures, almost overwhelmed by a deluge of sweets.

Papa had invested a small fortune in boxes of sweets, such boxes as in the early and timid days of his passion (long before he thinks of visiting the jeweler) a lover buys for the lady to whom he is paying court. But these boxes masqueraded as Meissen china, as bronzes,

as whimsicalities of one sort and another. Surely one who sent a girl so entrancing a gift would be able to count on a favourable reception when next he should call!

Mamma had a keen eye for such customers, spotting them directly they came into the shop by their furtive air and their general get-up. She would instantly put aside anything else she was doing, and by a subtle flattery, by hinting with a roguish smile at the likelihood of good fortune, she would usually stimulate the purchaser, and induce him to pay without question whatever price was marked.

Stumpy was far too lacking in verve to deal with these cases. Nor did Mamma care to turn them over to Gudrun, though for a very different reason. Gudrun was so attractive that young men would at once begin a respectful flirtation, and were then naturally loth to show by making a big purchase that their affections were engaged elsewhere.

Nor would Stumpy make much of a success in serving the matrons who were on the look-out for a good bargain. The phrase, "I think, Madam, you would perhaps do better if you were to . . ." a phrase which was usually intended to promote the buying of a more expensive article, did not rise easily to her lips. Her business was to meet the wishes of the most ordinary folk, and especially of servantmaids and children, whose modest demands must also be humoured by a shopkeeper at Christmas.

At this task, with chilly feet and a hot head, she had to slave for two or three weeks, so that Christmas Eve was doubly welcome since it came to relieve her from such a *corvée*.

It was a consolation to her, of course, to know that she was helping her parents during the only weeks in

the year when the business paid really well—for the Easter harvest was small in comparison.

As a reward, in the end, came the Christmas tree and the Christmas dinner. At this latter the last thing any of the Lüdickes wanted to see on the table was candy.

They had handled enough of that during the previous three weeks to sicken them of it for the rest of the year.

Chapter Four

STUMPY TRIES TO LEARN THE NEW DANCES

ANOTHER reward was awaiting her: the dancing-lessons which had been promised her on her birthday. Immediately after the New Year, the course for which she had put down her name was to begin. Willi, Kurt, and Hans Joachim, who had called to wish her a Happy New Year, promptly decided, on being informed about the dancing-class, that they would come too.

Stumpy was not best pleased to begin with, for in the past she had suffered a good deal from their mutual jealousies; but the nearer the day came for the first lesson, the more was she inclined to congratulate herself on the prospect of having her old acquaintances as companions and protectors on her voyage into these wild and uncharted seas of life.

Thus it was that she had a bodyguard of three when she entered the battlefield.

A young queen could not have been better squired. Gudrun might sneer at them as hobbledehoyes if she pleased; but of all the youngsters ranged along the walls (proud of their get-up, and each of them with the corner of a red or blue silk handkerchief peeping as per regulation from his breast pocket) none were so mature, none had so distinguished an appearance, as her old playmates.

Willi cut a particularly fine figure. Since October he had been working in a bank, and he had learned a lot from the other bank-clerks. He wore a black

jacket with braiding, and had a pearl tiepin—a small pearl, and therefore presumably genuine. The only thing that still gave him rather a schoolboy look was that he had not yet had his fair hair cropped short, but let it flourish in a great plume over his forehead.

Kurt, though he had not left school, looked older than Willi; but his pug-nose and his habit of blinking with his shortsighted eyes made him appear bashful and even sullen at times. No one would have guessed him to be a poet, though he turned out quite a lot of verses. In one set of these he had apostrophised Stumpy as his "liana," and had indeed interspersed botanical names rather too freely. We need not go through the list. A sample will suffice:

Mignonette and gillyflower!
I'll love thee till my dying hour!
Geranium's sweet and so's narcissus!
But sweeter far are thy sweet kisses!

Hans Joachim, on the contrary, was a young man with a practical turn. Electrotechnics were his chosen field and he entertained hopes of becoming a great inventor. Promise rather than performance as yet! He dreamed of making a heavier-than-air flying machine which would ascend vertically instead of planing up obliquely, but was not unlikely to be forestalled before his dreams could become realities. He was an enthusiast for the open-air life, and exceedingly muscular, so even when dressed for ceremony he wore knickerbockers and a shirt with a roll-collar. Being the son of a sometime court official, it seemed to him that patriotic displays were incumbent on him, so he always sported a black-and-white-and-red necktie in a challenging manner. This involved him now and again in

brawls, wherein his powerful physique usually gave him the advantage.

Thus attended, Stumpy entered the dancing-hall, the presiding genius of which was an amiable but strict lady who had several times crossed the line that marks the end of a woman's prime, but had again and again repented of the step, and had thereupon resumed the demeanour of one in the later twenties.

To reveal forthwith something which could not long be concealed, it has regretfully to be admitted that Stumpy proved to be one of the least gifted among the pupils.

Hitherto when she had felt in the mood for dancing she had spontaneously and artlessly danced gracefully enough. Now she could not master the simplest of these unfamiliar steps.

In the foxtrot, after the four foxtrot walks, she would half-turn to the left instead of to the right; when the time came for the Habanera steps, she invariably began with the wrong foot; and as for the "dip" at the pause, she always made it last two beats instead of one.

In the tango, she could never manage the end of the first step properly, and in the one-step cruzado she would lapse into a four or five beat movement instead of the appropriate two or three beats.

Often she was in despair, and the mischievous smiles of her fellow-pupils when she was berated by the dancing-mistress convinced her that in this purely artistic field all she could achieve was to make herself ridiculous.

The strange thing was that when a round dance was running its course freely, she managed so well that everything seemed to go on oiled wheels. Instead of being guided by her partner, she guided him, and he

accepted her guidance without demur whenever she wished to modify the step in accordance with her own taste.

With the result that the dancing-mistress wrung her hands in hopeless perplexity, and called out for every one to hear: "Oh, well, dance it as you please, Fräulein Lüdicke; instruction is wasted on you!"

Thereupon something even more remarkable happened.

A raucous voice was suddenly raised in protest, a voice in the "breaking" phase of the transition from boyhood to manhood. "What on earth are you talking about, I should like to know? Fräulein Lüdicke is the best dancer in the room!"

Who had thus spoken? Was it Willi or Kurt or Hans Joachim? No, for not one of the three had pluck enough thus publicly to espouse Stumpy's cause. It was a stocky youth, hardly taller than Stumpy herself, wearing yellow shoes and having pale-blue silk facings to his coat. The sort of fellow you see as the youngest assistant in a grocer's shop, a lad who is finely bullied by his seniors if he is not ready enough on his pins when serving customers.

"You saucy young ruffian!" exclaimed the dancing mistress, beside herself with wrath. "I never heard of such impertinence. Leave the room at once."

Instead of obeying, the youngster straddled his legs as if to take a firmer grip of the floor, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and replied: "Not much! I've paid for my lessons, and I'm jolly well going to have them."

"We'll see about that," screamed the mistress still more incensed. "I'll send for my chief, and he'll bundle you out neck and crop. You young jackanapes, you!"

"You old nanny-goat, you," shouted back the offender, not to be outdone in this wordy warfare.

Then, indeed the fat was in the fire.

Stumpy's three friends, as in chivalry bound, grouped themselves protectingly round her supporter. Several of the other young gentlemen, however, spurred on by girls whose envy had been aroused by the words "the best dancer in the room," espoused the cause of the dancing-mistress.

In an instant two opposing armies had formed, and a bout of fisticuffs seemed imminent.

Stumpy was in tears. She plucked her various defenders by the coat, imploring them to refrain from violence, and to take her home, for she could not bear this scene any longer.

But Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim felt that honour was at stake, and that it would be cowardly to desert the field of battle.

Thus the quarrel continued for a time. The dancing-mistress, likewise in tears, had fled from the room, but soon came back, accompanied by an elderly gentleman of friendly aspect. At sight of the row which was in progress, he stretched forth his hands as if in benediction, and exclaimed in gentle but somewhat grieved tones: "Pray what are you all about once more? Pray what are you all about once more?"

He spoke as if such happenings were an unfortunate but everyday experience.

Instantly there was silence, for the authority of this chief whom no one had ever before seen had its due effect upon the contending parties.

"Children! Children!" he went on. "That sort of thing has nothing to do with dancing. We had arranged for you to begin the Charleston to-day, and it's

no easy matter. I'll take the class myself until Fräulein Reichardt has had time to compose her nerves. Now in the Charleston, the gentleman makes two little bends with his left knee first, and the lady the same with her right. That's it! Now repeat the movement but with the other leg. That's it! Now you, Fräulein, please." He addressed Stumpy, who was close to him.

"No, no," she said resolutely. "I'm going home."

She turned on her heel and marched from the room. Despite the remonstrances of the master, her three young friends promptly followed in her train.

But the valiant knight whose intervention on her behalf had provoked the disturbance would not budge.

He'd paid for the course, and was determined to get his money's worth.

Stumpy was hurt by his defection. It seemed to her unchivalrous; and when, one day shortly afterwards, she saw him behind the counter in a drug-store, she walked out of the place without a word to him, and without buying what she had come in for.

She could, you see, be an ungrateful little hussy!

Of course the rencounter was made painful to her by the thought of her lost dancing-lessons.

It was a great grief to her to see the way in which others were leaving her behind in the mastery of the new dances, making of these an end in themselves, regarding them (or so it seemed) as even more important than the art of love in whose honour the dances had been inaugurated.

She often felt as if she had been shut out of paradise. Her only consolation was her inward certainty that this reign of injustice would not last for ever—that some day the gates would be opened to admit her.

Chapter Five

THE FASCINATING DENTIST

WITH the coming of spring Stumpy had to look out for a job.

Of course she might have become an assistant in her father's shop, but Mamma thought that would be a waste of time. Among the gentlemen customers, there was little prospect of her finding a good match. The best that could be hoped in this direction would be a casual flirtation, and that would be of little benefit either to the girl or to her relatives.

Had she had her mother's experience, combined with knowledge how to use it, matters would have been different. Mamma, by smiling to herself dreamily and by a significant flutter of the eyelids, was able to induce even the most prudent paterfamilias to call a second time.

But Stumpy, in her innocence, might stand behind the counter for ever and a day without improving her chances in the least—and all the time she would be growing older. Youth, especially marriageable youth, is fleeting.

No, she must seek occupation elsewhere, in a likelier field.

Yet opportunity was slow to present itself. Stumpy answered numerous advertisements, but nothing came of it. Nor was this surprising. She had no testimonials; and when, as sometimes happened, she was asked to send a photograph, a warning shyness restrained her. She guessed that those who wanted to

see her photograph were on the look-out for something more than mere diligence, punctuality, and competence.

One day when for the nth time she had been scanning the columns of the "Lokalanzeiger" and had been writing letters of application in her best schoolgirl hand, Herbert came up from behind and grinned as he peeped over her shoulder.

"At your old drudgery, Kid?" he enquired. "You'll never find yourself a job that way. If you could apply in person, you'd have a very good chance, for you're by no means an unattractive little thing. But nothing will come out of these everlasting letters. If you're not absolutely set on the shorthand-typist stunt, I might perhaps be able to put something in your way—and in a place where you'd be under my protective wing, so to speak."

Stumpy jumped up, eagerly exclaiming:

"Where? What? Who?"

"Well, my boss has sacked his assistant again. He always has females and he's always changing 'em, so you mustn't count on anything permanent either. But you'd learn quite a lot. To say nothing of the fashionable patients whose acquaintance you'd make. Anything might happen, if you knew how to turn your chances to good account."

Stumpy was torn by conflicting impulses.

She had an obscure feeling that if she were to get the vacant post she would be running into danger; and yet the prospect was brilliant, and offered such diversified experiences, that to hold back would be cowardly.

Besides, she felt pretty sure of herself. She would not throw herself away—and if people were nice to her, so much the better!

"You think you've only got to recommend me?" she asked Herbert.

Her half-brother shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can tell? He may have had some one else on the string for a long time. Nor do I think it would be the best thing for me to open the campaign by recommending you. Write to him saying you have heard from me that the job's going. Give me your photo, and I'll keep it in my note-case, shall be carrying it about with me from brotherly affection, in case he should think of asking me about you. Then perhaps it will all go like one o'clock."

That horrid demand for a photograph once more! Still, since it seemed that nothing could be done without it, she made no protest, but fetched a picture-postcard of herself—she had had the photo taken at the request of her three young friends. Well, anyhow she hadn't to offer it for inspection this time. Herbert would show it if he was asked what she looked like.

She wrote the letter, with the utmost care, and on her very best notepaper. After that she had to wait two whole days; no, three.

At length, at midday, her brother came, thrust his tongue into his left cheek, rubbed the resulting protuberance with his fingers, and said with a meaning smile: "What ho!"

That was all, but she tumbled to his meaning. The affair had clicked.

Then he handed her a pencilled memo: "Wednesday 4.30."

This very day! Her heart seemed to stand still. So dumbfounded was she that she could scarcely pay attention to Herbert's instructions.

"The smartest rig-out you've got, and you must be specially neat in the matter of shoes and stockings.

Hat coming well down over the left eye, for that's the latest craze. And don't be bashful on any account. He's used to the cheek of the American girls."

"Ought I to talk English?" she asked. She had been learning it at the commercial school, and could speak it quite prettily.

Herbert laughed. "He's as much of a Charlottenburger as you and me, and when he doesn't bother to think about it he patters with a moderate Berlin accent. But when he has distinguished patients, or for any other reason wishes to pose as a swell foreigner, he pulls out the High-German stop and at the same time introduces an American twang. That impresses people, and enables him to charge bigger fees. He's a charming rogue! Live and let live, that's my motto. Anyhow he lets poor me live very comfortably, which is the chief thing so far as I'm concerned. So long!"

He vanished, leaving Stumpy to her own devices.

At three she began to smarten herself up. She put on a flowered lilac frock, and wore to match it the lilac silk stockings she had got for her dancing-lessons. A new pair of gloves, shammy leather with black stitching. She allowed two or three love-locks to peep over her left eye from beneath the brim of her hat. A raid on Gudrun's belongings provided her with an Angora fur-cape. When she had fastened this close under the chin (she knew that was the stylish way), she looked ripping.

What a pity no one was there to see that everything was just so, but Mamma was in the shop, and Gudrun had departed long since with a roll of music under her arm.

Moreover, Stumpy had kept her own counsel about

this appointment, so that she need not avow a failure if nothing came of it. She could trust Herbert to hold his tongue.

DR. GILBERT A. SHADOW

she read on the brass plate affixed to the marble wall beside the door of the flat.

"Shadow"—the word had a meaning in English, as she knew well enough. An odd name for a man of German birth. She supposed it must have been Schadow to begin with, for there were Germans of that name, such as the famous sculptor and many others. No doubt he had dropped the "c" when he had become an American.

Nervously she pressed the button of the electric bell.

The door was promptly opened by a blackamoor. Yes, a veritable negro, in a grass-green tailcoat trimmed with gold braid. She was so flabbergasted that she could not utter a word.

All she could manage was to hold out the card on which had been pencilled: "Wednesday, 4.30."

The black janitor, a young fellow of about twenty with a broad grin, grasped the situation in a moment.

Nodding confidentially, he led the way to a waiting-room, brightly lit, and well-furnished with a black-and-gold suite, Persian rugs, and the like.

"Please take a seat," he said in English.

"Thank you," she answered, as unconcernedly as possible, in the same tongue.

She noticed that she was more at ease. It was like being on the stage. If she played up, she would get on all right.

The side door opened. At first all she could see was

a white jacket, like a waiter's it seemed; but soon she made out that it was of repp silk—a house-coat of such fine material that it took your breath away.

The wearer was a tall man with an angular and commanding head, of the type peculiar to the Americans, the lords of the earth. It was amazing almost incredible that he should have been born in Charlottenburg.

The most remarkable thing about him was his eyes, melancholy eyes that looked forth languishingly from deep sockets, lit up now and again by strange lights, and threateningly crowned by thick semicircular eyebrows.

What eyes! What extraordinary eyes!

No one under their scrutiny could have any inclination to play the fool.

"You have been warmly recommended to me, Fräulein Lüdicke," said the doctor. "By my chauffeur. Inasmuch as he is a man of birth and culture, a gentleman in fact, I think I may assume that his sister will be a lady. Indeed, the assumption is confirmed by your appearance."

Stumpy bowed graciously, as beseemed the lady Dr. Shadow proclaimed her.

But a ghost of a smile, flickering for an instant on his otherwise immobile countenance, made her feel that she had probably a little overdone the ladylike pose.

"Anyhow we can but try," he went on. "In ordinary life, everything depends on the impression one makes. It seems to me that in the nurse's dress which you will have to wear as my assistant, you will make—excuse me if I do not express myself perfectly in German—a very handsome impression."

He rang the bell, which was answered by the negro. Now the "imperfect" German was dropped for a moment.

"Johnny, bring in the costume. The smallest size, please."

Never before had Stumpy heard such an English English as this. It sounded so convincingly right that she was ashamed of her own faulty pronunciation.

Johnny soon returned with a nurse's overall and cap, laid them on a couch, and vanished.

"Take off your hat and cloak," said the dentist, in a tone of quiet command, and Stumpy hastened to obey.

Shadow had a way with him which made obedience delightful as well as necessary.

As she stood there in her flowered frock, short-sleeved, cut rather low as was the fashion that year, and reaching only to her knees, the doctor took up his station in front of her just far enough away to get a good general impression. Contemplating her with his eyes half closed, he gave a murmur of approval.

"Now put on the overall," he said.

When it became obvious that the garment was new to Stumpy, and that she did not know how to get into it, he came closer, relieved her of it, and said: "I'll help you."

She merely had to stand still while he did so. But when, in fastening the waistband, her fingers touched his she felt as if she had thrust her hand into the fire.

Last of all he took up the cap, fluttered it over her for a moment, and then pressed it gently down on to the back of her head.

She would have given almost anything for a look at herself in the glass, but there was none. Nor did it seem necessary after all, for he was sizing her up with an air of approval which showed that he was thoroughly satisfied with her in this garb likewise.

"You can take them off," he said. "You are engaged."

When she stammeringly tried to utter a few words of thanks, he made a gesture which cut her short, and said: "Of course this is only provisional. We've still got to see how you get on in the consulting room. Most men in my profession employ assistants who have been through a dental course, but I prefer to give the necessary instruction myself. Come here to-morrow at half-past eight, and you shall have your first lesson before the patients begin to arrive at nine. Good-bye."

She never knew how she got away from the house, and could not recall having the door opened for her by the grinning negro, though of course Johnny must have let her out. She sped on wings to the shop, meaning to tell her parents the joyful tidings, but when she was at the shop-door she found she lacked courage to enter. Her good fortune was like a precious secret, like some fairy treasure which would crumble into dust if it were prematurely disclosed.

So she ran off to the Tiergarten, waited there while her flushed cheeks were cooling, and whispered to herself: "What an interesting man. What a fascinating man."

He was daimonic, elemental, fascinating in the original sense of the word, before it had been weakened by everyday use. The sort of man one has read about in novels, but never expects to meet in actual life. In the theatre, perhaps? She had seldom been to the theatre, for lack of funds. But Gudrun, who was in professional circles, got free tickets for the opera occasionally, and had sometimes taken Stumpy along.

At the supper table she had, for good or for ill, to tell them the news. It aroused the proper amount of surprise, and led to some eager questioning. Papa

congratulated her on her luck; Mamma dwelt on the prospects that were opened up; and Gudrun, as usual, smiled inscrutably.

When Stumpy asked her, "Aren't you glad?" she made a characteristic grimace, kindly but comical, and answered: "A great chap, our Herb!"

But Gudrun was not unfeeling, after all.

She did not go out that evening; and when the two girls had gone up to their room, and had undressed, the elder came in her nightgown to sit on Stumpy's bed, put her arms round the younger, and said: "Look here, little one, to-morrow you're going out into life. Now, life is dangerous, and malicious as well. It's like being thrown into deep water when one doesn't know how to swim. Some people sink into the depths. Others, if they use their arms and legs rightly, paddle about as happily as if, on a summer evening, they were splashing in a warm bath. It's no use my saying to you, 'don't do anything foolish,' for often enough a folly is the loveliest thing in the world. But if you get into a fix, come to me and tell me all about it. I'll help you if I can."

"I wish I could," thought Stumpy, sighing. But, remembering how she had cheated her sister a few months before, she could not say a word.

All she could do was to kiss Gudrun, with an unexpressed yearning for forgiveness.

Long before half-past eight next morning, Stumpy was at Dr. Shadow's, wearing her nurse's cap and over-all, ready for anything.

She felt thoroughly at ease, now, for there was a mirror in the hall of the dentist's flat, and when she had peeped into it, after changing, it had shown her that she looked very nice.

Besides, the negro, who lent her a hand, grinned from ear to ear as he looked at her, chuckled approvingly, and said: "Spiffing!"

"What?" enquired Stumpy, for her English did not run to the understanding of this word, and she was not sure if she had heard aright; but the hilarious tone in which he repeated "Spiffing!" was enough.

Soon the doctor appeared, not to-day in the short house-coat, but wearing a surgeon's long overall, which gave him a very businesslike aspect.

"This morning," he said, "I'll explain to you the most elementary of your duties."

He showed her how she was to arrange a napkin round the patient's neck, and to have a glass of warm medicated water for rinsing the mouth always ready on the bracket of the flushing-table. He told her the names of the various instruments in daily use: probes, forceps, emery disks; the plane and concave mirrors, the carious excavators. He explained to her how to prepare the lysoform disinfecting solution, and how to use the steriliser.

Passing on to actual dental manipulations, he gave her a demonstration upon the mixing of amalgam, and showed her how a hollow tooth was filled with it. These things all seemed simple enough.

He gave his little lesson carefully and circumstantially, scarcely looking at her the while; but whenever his fingers chanced to touch hers, a flame ran from them into the depths of her being.

At length came the moment when Johnny ushered in the first patient.

This was an elderly lady, whose grey hair was waved. She had eyeglasses, hung round her neck by a fine gold chain interspersed with tiny pearls.

Stumpy wanted to help her off with her costly fur mantle, but the doctor waved his assistant aside, and performed this service with his own hands.

When he spoke to the newcomer it was in the rather laboured High German with a slight American twang, of which Herbert had told his sister, but which she now heard for the first time. His eyes glowed, too, with the tender light which had glowed for Stumpy the day before.

As she began to perform the tasks expected of her, she felt as if her fingers were all thumbs. Ere long, however, she found herself gaining ease and confidence, so that she soon got the better of her nervousness.

One lady patient followed another, and to every one of them his manner was the same: the same tempered zeal; the same pose of the distinguished foreigner; the same languishing glances; and, above all, a delicate familiarity which never transgressed the bounds of respect, and was consequently all the more winning.

And how they smiled, how they expanded, in the sunshine of his presence, under the magnetism of his touch.

Many of them were stiff and distant on first arrival, but thawed by degrees, so that they were forthcoming and gracious by the time the visit was over. Not a few of them, however were ready to exchange a glance of mutual understanding directly they came into the room—one of those glances which seem to mean more than a loving word or a kiss.

Stumpy took note of all these manifestations, though with her heart even more than with eyes and ears. She sensed them as thrills in the skin, and tingling in her finger-tips.

The result was that she began to feel despondent and

envious, as if she alone were shut out from a secret fellowship in which they were happy and privileged participants.

Every one of them ignored her. But no, this was not quite true. To begin with, indeed, she usually encountered a cold and impassive, if not positively repellent, mien; but when she had gently tucked a napkin round the patient's throat, had unobtrusively yet attentively handed Dr. Shadow everything he wanted, the face in the chair would grow less aloof, and would even regard her with a certain kindness.

Some of the patients were men, though these were exceptional. To them, her employer's manner was utterly different. They were all regular patients it would appear, for they were welcomed with a cordial handshake, and a word or two of comradely greeting.

Where they were concerned, she came into the foreground of the picture. They, likewise, showed some reserve, it is true, but this was not the mask for aloofness. On the contrary! It almost seemed as if she must be playing the star part. Whenever they spoke to Shadow, they eyed her furtively, as if to include her in the conversation, and to make sure that she too was taking note. When she came with her napkin to one of these gentlemen patients seated in the great dental chair, his body would involuntarily move towards her a little, in expression of a half-conscious wish to be near to her.

Dr. Shadow apparently saw nothing of this; but once, when she chanced to meet his eyes, he looked at her quizzically, yet approvingly it would seem.

When the last patient had gone, and she was about to tidy the place before leaving, he came up to her, gave her a little pat on the cheek (which glowed for hours afterwards!) and said with an enigmatic smile: "It's

all right, child. I think we shall get on very well with one another."

Next morning she had a second lesson. She was shown how to manipulate the cement used for temporary fillings, and the plaster for casts, the setting of which was to be checked by watching a specimen lump outside the mouth. When the fragments of the cast were being removed (to be fitted together afterwards into a perfect model of the jaw), she had to hold a receiver underneath and make sure that not even the tiniest morsel went astray.

Thus things went on day after day.

Stumpy was extremely attentive, and everything was satisfactory.

"You are learning here in a fortnight what it would have taken you a year to learn at the dental hospital," said Dr. Shadow.

As he spoke, there shone once more in his eyes the tender light which had not since her first coming been again vouchsafed to her.

This was at one and the same time a pleasure and a pain; and mingled in the feeling was a certain amount of anxiety, though in general by now she had ceased to be afraid of him.

One morning he said: "To-day I'm going to initiate you into the mystery of the back rooms, of which as yet you have had no inkling."

In fact, she had had an inkling, and a rather uneasy one, for sometimes the doctor would say to one of his lady patients: "I think I must take an X-ray photograph of that jaw of yours."

True, he said the same thing to the men sometimes, but much less often, and never with the peculiar, one might almost say the possessive smile he used when a lady was in question. And the lady would generally

answer with a smile. Then the two of them would disappear into that back room which Stumpy had never visited.

What a time they would stay there, twenty minutes, or even as much as half an hour. Meanwhile other patients were crowding into the waiting-room, and Stumpy would keep on looking at her wrist-watch, as if in the hope that this would make her dilatory chief come back sooner.

She supposed they were so deep in conversation that they had forgotten how the time was slipping by—but there was another possibility which, do what she would, kept thrusting itself into her mind.

When the doctor came back at last, he was usually alone. The lady had departed through the doorway leading from the back room into the passage. A few days later, she would come again, and then she and Shadow would greet one another with the meaning smile which from the very first had aroused Stumpy's suspicions.

But to-day the doctor was himself taking Stumpy into this place of mystery which, while still unvisited, had been a focus of trouble to her.

The mere thought of going there had alarmed her, and now, when the door was opened for her to enter, she was positively startled.

For inside, it was quite dark. There was black baize over the windows, nailed there, so that the daylight could never make its way into the room. When the doctor turned a switch, a sinister red glow appeared, displaying a formidable instrument which looked not unlike a guillotine, and a roomy couch beside the wall—a couch simultaneously alluring and forbidding.

"You'll never have anything to do in here," said Dr. Shadow. "This room is only for experts and

for patients. Unless, that is to say, I may ask you now and again to dust it, to air the place a little, and so on."

"Good Lord!" thought Stumpy, very much affrighted, and yet flattered at the same time by the prospect of being allowed to keep order in this holy of holies.

"Last of all you shall make the acquaintance of my mechanic," went on the doctor, closing the door of the dark room and advancing along the passage. "He is rather like an alchemist in his laboratory, and gets restive when he is disturbed."

This dental mechanic had been mentioned often enough, but Shadow had never yet sent Stumpy to him.

Now the door was opened into a room whose walls were grimed with smoke, and whose atmosphere (so Stumpy thought) was poisoned with mephitic vapours. A yellowish-violet flame, thrusting snakelike tongues hissingly to caress a golden semicircle, diffused a pale, eerie light that seemed to come from the underworld. Behind this flame sat an old man wearing dark spectacles with huge, round lenses. He was lean, with a long, pointed nose like that of a shrewmouse, and his withered chin was decorated with white bristles.

Hearing the door open, he lowered the flame, whereupon the hissing noise ceased. Then he took off his goggles, to show good-humored but weary eyes, which looked Stumpy up and down questioningly.

"This is Fräulein Lüdicke, our new assistant," said the doctor. "I felt it was time to introduce her to you, Herr Bach!" Thereupon turning to Stumpy: "He is the tutelary genius of the establishment. I took him over from my predecessor, to whom also he was a legacy. In a word, he outlasts us all."

Herr Bach wiped a dirty hand on his dirty overall, and extended it to Stumpy. With a fervour she would have found it hard to explain, she clasped it in her own.

"Well," said Shadow, "now you've seen all there is to see, and you'll be able to find your own way to Herr Bach whenever I have occasion to send you."

Stumpy said a polite "Good-bye," but the old man, now sunk in his own thoughts, made no response. Yet, as she walked out of the room after the doctor, she fancied for a moment she had heard him murmur, "Poor child."

Since, however, at this moment the hissing of the flame had begun again, perhaps her ears had deceived her.

Thenceforward, for a while, there was no change in the routine of her daily life.

Her lessons became shorter and fewer, but by degrees some of the more delicate manipulations were entrusted to her. She learned how to tint the cement fillings correctly, and how to match artificial teeth to the patient's natural ones. She was taught how to prepare injections of novocaine, and was so skilful in keeping out airbubbles that Dr. Shadow had no occasion to bother.

The climax of her activities was to help in gold fillings. The mere fact that she was handling gold thrilled her. And when the little wooden mallet she wielded struck the tiny metal wedge held by the doctor, she felt that each blow was a sort of consecration.

There seemed to be no change in her employer's manner towards herself, except the inevitable growth in intimacy from better acquaintance. It appeared to her the most natural thing in the world that from time

to time he should put his arm round her shoulders, and that at each repetition he should draw her a little closer than before. Surely it was natural too that when he was especially pleased with her—as happened more and more frequently, she was delighted to note—he should take her head between his hands, and imprint a fatherly kiss on her hair or her forehead. All grew so simply out of their everyday association, was so conformable to the spirit of the passing moments, that it would have been rather strange if he had kept his distance.

She had been mistaken, she now felt, in regarding him as possessed of an almost sinister power of fascination, in looking upon him as daimonic. His attitude towards her was paternal. In view of the difference between their ages, and of her youth and innocence, those affectionate glances of his were only to be expected.

Her jealousy was no longer aroused when he smiled to welcome his good-looking lady patients, since he made up for this by his manner towards herself when they were alone together afterwards. Nor did the time seem so interminable when he took one of them into the X-ray room. He had told Stumpy that it was often expedient for the patient to rest while the plate was being developed, above all if a novocaine injection had recently been administered.

Yet perhaps he was daimonic after all! But only towards these elegant and distinguished ladies who wore strings of pearls (Stumpy's sharp eyes had learned now to recognise genuine pearls) and were scented with chypre or with poudre d'or.

Why shouldn't they fall madly in love with him? Even if he enjoyed them and then threw them away,

they only had their deserts. They threw themselves away, for they were shameless in showing him how much they longed to be possessed by him.

She would never do anything like that. Never, never! No matter how strong the temptation might be.

Long since she had faced up to the worst that could befall. She was a modern girl, and would not try to humbug herself.

Afraid? Yes, of course one was afraid. But curiosity preponderated. In truth, if fate had decreed that the worst was not to happen, one would perhaps be a little disappointed!

On the first of the month, she was paid her salary.

"This is only to begin with, while you're still a learner," he said good-naturedly. "By and by you'll earn more."

She thought, however, that he was already paying her a good deal more than her services were worth. It was hardly decent to accept so much. She began to stammer out words to that effect, whereupon he put his arm round her waist and drew her down on to his knees.

Stumpy's notion of a fatherly relationship took wings to itself and flew away. Simultaneously there was a release of tensions, and she began to sob.

At once he dropped his arm from her waist; but she continued to sit where she was, lowered her head on to his shoulder, and had her cry out there.

Again he put his arms round her; he kissed her forehead, her throat, and at last her lips—yes, her lips! But she did not think of him as a seducer. He was only doing what her own yielding behaviour had made in-

evitable. Had he not done so, she would have felt slighted.

On her way home that afternoon she was neither anxious nor depressed, but triumphant—so triumphant that Gudrun noticed it.

Stumpy tried to explain away her obvious elation as the result of having been paid a much larger salary than she had anticipated, but this explanation did not go down. Her sister smiled with the air of one who knows better, stroked her hair, and said affectionately yet a trifle sadly: "Dear little Stumpy!"

Thenceforward for a time her relations with her employer remained at the stage they had reached on pay-day.

He kissed her when she came in the morning and when she left after the day's work was done, fondled her now and again, but was content with these endearments.

"This is sweet," thought Stumpy. "Things must go no farther."

But one afternoon he said: "This is Johnny's day out. He's gone. We'll clean out the X-ray room while he's away."

Her heart beat furiously, suffocatingly.

As she went with him into the passage, and saw that the door of the mechanic's room was open, she knew that the old man, too, must have left work.

She no longer had any doubt concerning what this fateful hour held in store.

Chapter Six

STUMPY HAS GROWN UP

WHAT happened next was the most wonderful thing of all—for nothing wonderful happened!

The world seemed to be going on much as usual.

When Stumpy came out into the street that afternoon, she thought the first comer, the moment he set eyes on her, would guess what had been taking place. Not a bit of it. This passer-by scanned her with the same expression of cheerful approval which she had got used of late to seeing in men's faces, since her bust had filled out and she had had her hair shingled.

The same with the next and the next and the next. Not one of them seemed to notice anything out of the common in her appearance.

When supper time drew near, she was afraid her flaming cheeks might betray her, so she said she had a headache, and thought she had better go and lie down.

But Mamma, glancing at her, said: "You don't look as if there were much the matter with you."

And, indeed, the glass told her that her face had resumed its natural colour, being neither too red nor too pale.

So this dread happening had passed without leaving a trace.

Besides, on reflection, there was nothing so very dreadful about it after all. It had become one of the rights of woman, nowadays; one of those rights which the transvaluation of all values (Stumpy had heard Gudrun use this fine phrase) had brought in its train.

Nay, was it not the first and foremost of all a woman's rights?

Perhaps she had been rather premature in exercising it, when she was still only sixteen. That was why it seemed so terrible at the first glance.

But when she looked into the matter, the situation became plain enough. She had grown up; she had simply grown up. Though she was not yet seventeen, though she was only a flapper, she had grown up.

She had grown up, and was now on an equal footing with Gudrun.

But Gudrun—there was the rub. Stumpy was afraid of her sister's powers of penetration.

Of course there was one thing which even Gudrun's sharp eyes had failed to notice, Stumpy's first love, her first great love anyhow. Better not think about that now, however. It stabbed like a knife, after what had happened to-day, to recall the ever-memorable experience of the previous spring.

Yet why should it? She had never met him again, and never would meet him again. The whole affair was over and done with. Probably he had become a land-steward on a rich man's estate. He might have leased or purchased an estate of his own, and be wooing one of the blue-blooded dames of the countryside.

Certainly he would no longer give any thought to Stumpy. He had probably forgotten that Stumpy had ever existed.

What was it to him whether Stumpy was Dr. Shadow's mistress or not?

"Mistress"—what a glorious word.

Madame de Maintenon had been a mistress. So had Ninon de Lenclos. The latter still at seventy; and she, Stumpy, was not yet seventeen!

Beginning so young, if she were capable and clever she might go far.

A foolish thought, that! She would never be either capable or clever, though Gudrun was both. She was only Stumpy; and if she had given herself so easily once, she would henceforward be the ready victim of any one who should trouble to make love to her.

The doctor had not even had to do that. He had just taken possession of her as he might pick up the dental mirror when he wanted to use it on a patient.

Of course he had been awfully sweet. He had asked with a smile whether her conscience would prick her, and whether she would be sorry at having bestowed on him the most precious of her possessions.

At that she had summoned pride to her aid, and had answered a little tartly: "If that was the most precious of my possessions, I could not have had much to lose."

She was sure that Gudrun would have replied in some such words, and it did her good to model herself on her dashing sister.

But hard on the heels of the saying came the questioning thought: "What if it really was the most precious of my possessions, all the same?"

No, no, a thousand times no. It wasn't. It wasn't. It wasn't. It was only to be looked upon as ballast, which one should rid oneself of as soon as the time came for climbing lightly and freely towards the heights.

She was modern, not medieval. Such thoughts as that virginity was a woman's chief treasure belonged to the Middle Ages. It was one of those useless legacies people continued to drag about with them long after they had ceased to have either meaning or value.

Thus did Stumpy's thoughts whirl like a caged squir-

rel's treadmill for a considerable part of the night, until at length she fell into a sleep which was profounder and more refreshing than she had known since early childhood. When Gudrun shook her out of it next morning, she was awakened from a dream in which she had been riding across a sunlit plain accompanied by her first lover. Riding? Nay, rather flying; for the hoofs of their horses were spurning the clouds.

The clock was striking eight, and she would have to hurry. On no account must she be late; that morning, of all mornings. For the very reason that she was his mistress as well as his assistant, she must be punctual.

As she went upstairs to the flat, her heart was beating furiously, no less furiously than on the day when she had come to apply for the position. She was terribly afraid of Johnny. Suppose he had found one of her tortoise-shell slides on the couch! It was missing, and when she was coming away she had been too much flustered to hunt for it. There was a certain consolation in the thought that other women wore similar slides.

But Johnny showed no sign of there being anything unusual. On the broad grin as ordinarily, and patting the breast of his livery coat in the customary way—for he was as proud as a peacock, and fond of showing off.

And the doctor?

"Good morning, my poppet!" Since pay-day he had invariably greeted her with this old-world English term of endearment. There was to be no change, then. He kissed her, as he now did every morning, on the forehead. Then she had to set to work clearing up, for yesterday a good deal had been left untidy.

He seemed unaware that here was a heart almost

breaking from anxiety and from bitter need of consolation, that a soul adrift was craving for anchorage.

Or, if he knew, he gave no sign, since for the nonce the simplest plan was to ignore what had happened yesterday.

When, in the course of the morning, handsome and smartly dressed ladies came for treatment, he welcomed them with languorous looks, and cared for them with studied devotion, just as though he were not under the scrutiny of loving eyes—eyes which, after the experience of yesterday, hung upon his every gesture.

As luck would have it, there was no X-ray case this morning. That, assuredly, would have been a crowning sorrow, would have been almost unbearable.

Not until the break came for luncheon (hitherto, while working for him, she had been content with a slice of bread and butter eaten in solitude) did he condescend to show her that she was of some value to him. To-day he did not drive away to the Eden Hotel, but sent Johnny out for some sandwiches and a bottle of port. She was to join him at this snack. He held out sandwiches for her to bite, and himself lifted the wineglass to her lips.

That made her feel better.

Still, a period of suffering had begun.

She was always on the look-out for an endearment, and when none was forthcoming she felt shunned and degraded. More and more did the fine ladies with whom he coquetted become an offence to her.

In the case of each newcomer of the female sex, gliding, tripping, or rustling through the doorway, she asked herself: "What will happen now?"

And mostly her painful expectations were fulfilled.

For him, to flirt and to dally with his lady patients seemed to be all in the day's work, quite as much as the

use of the drill, the excavator, and all the other instruments of his handicraft.

Besides, the excursions into the X-ray room had begun again. When he had disappeared with one of the chosen, Stumpy would sit as if turned to stone, staring into the void, filled with despair, until he came back at last with an air of well-simulated innocence, smiling at her as he said briskly: "Next patient, please."

At first she was afraid he was never going to make any further allusion to the gift of love she had bestowed on him. Indeed, when she was much out of humour with him she hoped he never would. But she was mistaken. Her turn came round in due course.

If when the last patient had gone Johnny happened to have been sent forth on an errand, so that (except for the old mechanic in his den) they had the place to themselves, Shadow would sometimes fling his arms round her and masterfully exact his rights, while she remained silent and passive.

Her only thought was at such times: "What must be, must be; and if he were to ignore me altogether, it would hurt me even more."

Once when all day she had been made miserable by watching his flirtations, and when at long last (as if to atone for his behaviour) he deigned to make smiling advances to Stumpy, her feelings were too much for her, and tears began to flow down her cheeks. The pile of unused napkins was handy. Seizing one of them, he gently wiped her face.

"There, there, my poppet," he said. "Are you jealous, or what's the matter?"

Making no answer in words, she sorrowfully laid her head on his shoulder.

"Let me tell you this much, darling," he went on consolingly. "Those women come and go, and it is

as if they had never been. You remain. If you keep up your spirits, continue to be as charming as ever, and don't make a fuss about what you see or think you see, why then, you are my dear love, and you will outlast them all."

These words of warning struck root. She saw that really she ought not to be jealous, and that, unless she could overcome the feeling, the sooner she threw up her job the better.

She was not strong enough to do that. He was her king and her lord. She was devoted to him body and soul. She would never be able to go on living without him.

He certainly did exercise an uncanny fascination.

Things went better after this. Her natural cheerfulness revived. When he was at his flirtations once more, she said to herself: "Let be! They come and go, but I stay."

For this reason, and perhaps for other reasons as well, at about this time she began to undergo a rapid change in appearance.

She became aware that men she met casually in the street were looking at her more attentively and more enquiringly than they had been used to, and above all she noticed that Dr. Shadow's gentlemen patients were making much more ardent advances. Sometimes they couldn't keep their eyes off her, and they would often attempt an inconspicuous caress. When her duties brought her close to one of these patients, she would suddenly become aware that he was stroking her little finger, or was furtively putting his arm round her waist. Then, if the doctor had occasion to leave the consulting-room for a moment in order to speak to the mechanic, the patient in the chair would be quick to seize his opportunity, and would say, "Won't you give me

your address, Fräulein," or "I wish you'd make a date with me some time soon." And so on. And so on.

Smilingly she would shake her head.

If the man was importunate, she would speak sharply in order to make him understand that she had no use for such nonsense.

At home, too, they were beginning to notice the improvement in Stumpy's looks.

Mamma kept on saying to Papa: "What on earth's happening to the child? She seems to be opening like a flower in the sunshine."

Thereupon Papa would stroke Stumpy's curly pate, and would answer in vague assent: "Yes, yes, that's so. You're quite right."

But Gudrun would look at her thoughtfully, and say never a word.

Chapter Seven

THE LOVE LORE OF THE OLD AND THE LOVE LORE OF THE YOUNG

ONE evening, towards the end of that winter, Mamma and Stumpy were sitting alone, listening to the radio.

Gudrun was out, and Papa was in the cellar kneading the dough. The other two had time to themselves, plenty of time for listening to the airs brought within range from an enormous distance by the supremest wonder of our age.

To-night there were Russian songs, freighted with yearning, with melancholy, and with pain.

Mamma had her eyes turned upwards. Her breast was heaving against the corset in which it was tightly prisoned. Frequently she uttered sighs, which Stumpy could not hear because of the headpiece with its ear-phones; but her mother's parted lips, and the movement of the hand to the heart, gave evidence of them as plain as any sound.

When a pause came in the music, Mamma took off the headpiece and signed to Stumpy to do the same.

"I've something to say to you, my child," she began, and the folds of her double chin seemed to give the words a solemnity which was intensified by the fixity of her gaze. "You will soon be of an age when you will learn about love."

Stumpy sat up and took notice.

"Yes, yes, my child, there's no need to protest. So far you've had no experience of such things, your heart is full of innocence——"

"Oh, my!" thought Stumpy.

"But love will come sooner or later. No one can hinder its coming, any more than one can do anything once it is there"; and Mamma sat staring before her, while Stumpy wondered whether Daddy had taught her all this or whether some one else had been responsible. "Well, my dear, I do not want you to set sail on the ocean of love without being prepared for what is likely to be in store for you. Be warned by your mother's experience, then you will not plunge headlong to your ruin. First of all, before falling in love, I advise you to study the man carefully."

"But if one is powerless against love, as you say," protested Stumpy, "what's the use of 'studying' the man?"

Mamma seemed a trifle nonplussed, but rallied her forces.

"All the same," she continued, "all the same, a girl must take careful stock of the man, to see whether he is a worthy object of her love, whether his intentions are honourable, what his prospects are. Above all she must make sure that he leads a respectable life. And so on."

"But how can one find out?" asked Stumpy. "One can't always be shadowing him."

Again Mamma seemed a trifle perplexed.

"You make such strange objections," she said. "One just has to put two and two together, judge by the way he looks at you, how he takes hold of you—"

"I don't think he ever does 'take hold,'" put in Stumpy.

"Of course not at first," answered Mamma. "And yet at times he has to—when you're dancing together for example."

"Oh, but then he puts his arm right round a girl," observed Stumpy sagely.

"Please don't interrupt," said Mamma somewhat tartly. "The dangers which beset a young girl's path are so many and so disastrous that she ought to be grateful for any advice and warning, especially when it is her own mother who is giving it, her own mother who has had to put up with so much. . . ."

"Oh, Mother," cried Stumpy, alive with curiosity, "have you had much to suffer in your life?"

But Mamma did not seem inclined to be catechised upon the point. She heaved another sigh, and then went on:

"Such a lot to put up with; such a peck of troubles! But what I want to say, and I say it from the bottom of my heart, is: 'Beware of the first kiss.' A kiss is the beginning of all the evil. For once a girl has been given a kiss, she feels more is wanted of her."

"How so?" questioned Stumpy, with a well-feigned assumption of innocence.

But again Mamma did not seem inclined to pursue the topic further.

"There, there, my child, you'll learn all about that as soon as love comes your way. Then you'll find out everything for yourself."

"Oh, but shall I?" asked Stumpy, her eyes wide with the eagerness of pretended ignorance.

"I ought to have said you will not find out," Mamma added, hastily trying to rectify the false step she had taken. "You won't find out anything until you are respectably engaged to be married."

"Are engaged people allowed to do pretty well as they like, then?" Stumpy queried, seeing in the network of maternal moral precepts a loophole of escape.

"No, no, my dear," protested Mamma. "Only of

course things are less dangerous then. Now that's enough. Plenty of time to talk these matters over in more detail."

She passed her hand over her forehead, as if to wipe away the beads of perspiration called forth by her daughter's artless enquiries.

Then, feeling that her brain was unequal to the task of holding its own in this interplay of question and answer, she slid gently back into the illogical muddle of her emotional existence whence, under the stimulus of Slavic melody, her impulse towards enlightening her daughter as to life's mysteries had arisen.

Yet, perhaps, she may have been impelled by a vague desire to share with another those things which otherwise could find expression only in sighs. Who knows? For now she resumed mournfully:

"Ah, my dear, let me tell you one thing: a woman's lot is full of yearning, full of longing which is never stilled."

"Even after she is married?" Stumpy's thoughts had flown to a certain young land-steward who would gladly appease every longing as it arose.

Once more Mamma appeared to be puzzled.

"That's a very difficult question to answer, child. A woman does not always marry according to her bent. Even if she does marry her fancy, life is full of trouble. You'll find that out soon enough. Oh, yes; there is always a longing, a longing. . . ."

She broke off, and seized the headpiece as a shipwrecked mariner seizes upon a spar.

But Stumpy was not inclined to let the matter drop. The talk had taken such an interesting turn, she could not allow it to be broken off so suddenly and inconclusively.

"I thought you meant to give me all kinds of use-

ful advice," she said tentatively. "Don't put on the earphones yet, there's a dear. Please, please go on talking. Tell me some more."

"What more can I tell you, my darling child?" asked Mamma, obviously wanting to gain time.

"For instance," persisted Stumpy, "I can't for the life of me see why a woman should have unsatisfied yearnings. Of course if the object of her affections leaves her," and now it was the girl's turn to sigh, "then it's only natural she should feel bad about it. But so long as he is with her, there surely is nothing left to yearn for."

Mamma opened astonished eyes, and glared severely at her daughter. She looked like a wrathful idol as she sat with her red, powdered, not uncomely face, the ample display of her corpulence overflowing the chair.

"And what about fidelity?" she snapped indignantly.

"What do you mean by fidelity?" Stumpy threw back. This time she was honestly at a loss to understand what her mother was striving at. Then, gradually it dawned on her that her worthy papa had not fully come up to her mother's expectations. But, without a moment's hesitation, she ranged herself on her father's side.

Mamma realised that the least said upon the topic the better, and she resolutely laid hands on the earphones once more.

"You are too young and inexperienced," she said. "You cannot understand such things. Go on dreaming your innocent dreams, but promise me that the first time love enters your heart you will come straight to me, and confide in me. Promise?"

Stumpy nodded ruefully, and when the Slavic songs were once more in full swing, she thought:

"Oh, dear, oh, dear! What a totally different world from ours do the old live in to be sure!"

A few days later, her sister took her to task. Now she was hard put to it to hold her own.

"Look here, Stumpy," said Gudrun as they were going to bed—the only time there was for sisterly confidences. "If you imagine for a moment that no one notices something's up, you're greatly mistaken."

"What should be up with me?" said Stumpy, aware that she was blushing furiously.

"That's just what I want you to tell me," answered the elder girl. "Your eyes have a look in them, a bold look, a look full of knowledge so to speak, such as one sees in the eyes of guttersnipes and priests."

"You've got such a look right enough," Stumpy rejoined promptly, "but I have not."

"I don't care if I have," said Gudrun. "It comes from having secrets that others suspect but cannot guess. Come on, out with yours, so that at long last we may really be on the same footing one with the other."

Stumpy felt sorely tempted. No one would be likely to understand so well as her sister, or to make allowances for what had happened. Yet a half-confidence was no confidence at all. She could not tell Gudrun about the recent experience without at the same time mentioning that other affair, more than a year old now, which persistently occupied her thoughts, and through which she had betrayed her sister's trust. That must remain her very own secret for ever. Better, therefore, to keep a still tongue concerning the more recent events too; especially since to a person who had not actually been present it might appear as if she had been

a victim, the defenceless victim of an unscrupulous man. And that she certainly had not been.

She pressed her lips together, determined not to let a syllable escape.

"I see you've made up your mind not to tell me," said Gudrun indifferently. "All right, have it your own way. But you're treating me unfairly, and of course you are being jolly unfair to yourself. For you need me, I tell you. Have you any idea what you should do when love comes your way? The man may be a rotter for all you know, and even if he seems all right at first he'll soon change his tactics if he finds he has to do with the clinging-ivy type. You see, we girls have made ourselves so cheap since the war, we are so easy to 'woo and win' as the phrase goes, that lots of men have come to look upon us as playthings, and they have the surprise of their lives when they suddenly realise they have to do not only with a woman's body but also with a human soul. So one has to be on guard all the time. For instance you may have an 'honest' offer of marriage from a fellow who is a nobody and is worthless from a money point of view. . . ."

"Do you mean he's a cheat—so far as marriage goes?"

"You are a funny kid! I don't think any one would try to swindle you! You don't look as if you were having any. But he might be a creeping-Jesus sort of fellow; a chap with a lot of morals, and dirty under-clothing. He'll go with you to the park and sit about on the grass because he has no money to pay for a chair; and if he takes you in somewhere for a drink and crosses his legs, he shows a large expanse of soiled woollen socks and pants so that you feel ready to sink into the ground with embarrassment. He'll stick to

you for years and years—and, in the end, it all comes to nothing. But you've got to be just as careful in your dealings with the men who have money to spend and are lavish in their gifts . . ."

"Why? Surely it's presents which tell a girl how much a man loves her," interposed Stumpy.

"Quite otherwise! They think that such gifts rid them of any responsibility towards the girl. They consider they have paid for the girl's love, that she is no better than a gay dame. Such a friendship must speedily be brought to a close. Again, there are some who try to surround themselves with a halo of mystery and won't tell you their names. They are either already married, or something worse. So soon as they have gained their end, they vanish into thin air and you never clap eyes on them again. Not that I wish to imply that it's a crime to be married. That's not it at all. Sometimes a married man treats a girl with more consideration than any other. But for a girl who wants to make the best of what the world has to offer, a married man isn't the goods. You can never go to the theatre together, and as for dancing. . . ! If he takes you out to dinner, you have to creep into the darkest corner, and if it's a smart restaurant you'll see him constantly glancing over his shoulder as if he feared the presence of spies. So it is always best to leave married men severely alone."

"What about elderly gentlemen?" asked Stumpy, her mind occupied with her employer—who was forty years old if a day.

Gudrun meditated for a moment, sucking her underlip in so far that it almost disappeared.

"That territory is unexplored land, so far as I am concerned," she said at length. "My motto has always been, 'Youth belongs to youth.' Yet I won't

deny that silver locks about the temples have a charm of their own. Some girls are smitten with a kind of mysterious thrill as soon as such a man merely comes near them."

Stumpy thought: "Just what happened to me!" The exact minute when the dentist entered her laughing, care-free life rose vividly before her eyes.

But there was some one else to whom none of her sister's wise saws applied. It would have been sacrilegious to have asked any one about him. Certainly he had "honourable intentions." Yet he, no less certainly, did not belong to the category Gudrun spoke of as "creeping Jesuses." Besides, was it not precisely because he could not carry his "honourable intentions" to the only possible conclusion, that he had gone right away?

"Do you mean," she asked, "that every man is after the same thing when they make up to a girl?"

Again Gudrun reflected before replying.

"Now and again one meets with a connoisseur in the art of love, a man who really likes to be with one for oneself, who is interested to find out what kind of a personality lies hidden behind the fair exterior. But on the whole, men all desire the same thing. Our worthy elders have the lovely word 'seduction' constantly in their mouths. Seduction, indeed! Just as if every woman did not *want* to be seduced! Indeed, we do our share in the seductive process, with our 'coy, reluctant, amorous delay' business. Every girl knows how to fan the flames, though we all of us pretend to be extinguishing them."

Stumpy thought: "I never fanned any flames; and yet the thing happened all the same."

"Unfortunately the players are not equally matched," continued Gudrun. "A woman's stake is

invariably the higher. If we really stop to think, we cannot help looking upon ourselves as mad, for, take it as you will, in the background there always looms the danger, the horrible danger, of having a baby. As soon as that's on the way, the romantic castle falls about one's ears, and one's newly-gained freedom goes up in smoke."

Stumpy caught her breath. She had never thought of such an eventuality.

"Thanks be, there are 'wise women' to go to in case of need, and we know where to find them; but, all the same, the business is dangerous in the extreme. A good many girls have lost their young lives over it. Others are too stupid or too fainthearted to take the road which leads that way. They choose, rather, to weep at mother's knee: 'Oh, Mummy, darling, do pity me!' Ugh, the sillies. They only bring the parental wrath down upon their heads, just as in the nineteenth century. Family row, recriminations, despair, 'never cross my threshold again,' and so on, until one might suppose that such a thing as a right to one's own individuality had never existed. So my advice to you, Stumpy, is: Watch out! You may take it from me, the whole thing is far from being a joke."

Gudrun crept into bed, and the talk came to an end. Soon she sank into a sleep that is only granted to those who have nothing on their minds.

But Stumpy tossed about till midnight, her heart racked by doubt and worry. Again and again she asked herself how long she could endure the present state of affairs.

A few days later—it was the following Sunday morning, the only time Stumpy had an opportunity of talking to her brother—Herbert, who had hitherto

always treated her as a sort of inexpensive toy, began to talk to her seriously, though still with an inflection of mockery in his voice.

The Lüdickes, man and wife, were busied over their accounts. Gudrun was practising. Thus Stumpy and Herbert could converse undisturbed.

"I bet you anything you like, Kiddoo, that you'll make your way in the world. The way you throw a leg and waggle your esteemed behind— I tell you, no cabaret dancer did it better."

"Cabaret dancer? What do you mean?" asked Stumpy, while her cheeks glowed with envy at the word "dancer."

"Oh, it's just a career, like any other. There's many a scattered-brained wench, a hall-porter's girl or the daughter of some penniless army officer, who has made a good match for herself by such means."

"And what do you consider a 'good match'?" Stumpy's voice was still full of envy as she put the question.

"Well, you see," returned her companion flicking the ash from his cigarette with a yellow-stained finger, "in this poverty-stricken world of ours there remain a few wealthy folk who are always getting richer at our expense. They have sons and, maybe, daughters. The boys have a high old time; the girls go in for study—which means that they, too, are on the loose, only they carry on behind a different kind of shopfront. If a man has the right flair and can catch the fancy of one or other of these money girls and something solid and real comes out of it all, ending up in a wedding from papa-in-law's newly acquired ancestral halls—that's what is called a 'good match,' and there's the end of the whole silly business. One can live in clover for the rest of one's life."

"And how is this desirable consummation achieved?" asked Stumpy grandiloquently, her choice of words mirroring the state of her feelings as such dazzling prospects were opened before her eyes.

Herbert threw away the end of his cigarette, and pushed the cuticle back from his nails to reveal the half moon at their base—a gesture which had become so confirmed a habit that no one could think of Herbert without at the same time seeing him in the act.

"Of course I myself am not in question; but so far as you are concerned, I should advise you to stay where you are for the present, to keep on at the tooth-carpenter's as long as you can. You'll pick up the way fine ladies behave, learn dignity of bearing, reticence, gentility, how to make men mad about you with a glance or the swish of your little bit of skirt. It's awfully important."

Stumpy was inclined to feel aggrieved both on her own account and on behalf of all other girls. But her indignation would not cut much ice with Herbert, she knew. Besides what he was saying might very well apply to certain of her sex.

"Make the best use of your time," he went on, "for it is quite on the cards that here and now something is taking shape that will prove of the utmost importance for your future welfare. Even when you are wearing your nurse's uniform, you must succeed in displaying a little coquetry, you must not look too demure, too much as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. A man might get put off, made a bit nervous, you know. As soon as the day dawns when you feel you have nothing more to learn or to gain in your present situation, don't have any sentimental scruples; just give him notice then and there, and trust your devoted brother

to fix you up elsewhere. He'll see you get on all right, never fear."

"How can you when you are only a chauffeur," exclaimed Stumpy, in part because she was dubious as to the young man's capacity to fulfil his promise, and in part because she wanted his promise confirmed.

"Don't be such a ninny! Haven't I already found you a job once? And do you really fancy that driving a car is my only occupation? Silly!"

Stumpy was all ears at this. Another secret no one had an inkling of!

Herbert chuckled her under the chin, saying:

"Mum's the word, comprenny? Gudrun may make herself cheap if she damn well please, but you and I are after the 'good match.' I'm almost sure I'll get there before long. But whichever of us strikes oil first, must help the other to climb out of the ditch."

So saying he turned, and left Stumpy a prey to renewed doubt and renewed hope.

How stupid she had been ever to believe that her brother spent his nights driving the dentist about, that he was all these hours at duty! How could a doctor hope to carry on his profession if he had spent the night carousing or on the loose? His hands would have been unsteady and would have betrayed him. But Dr. Shadow's hands always accomplished their task with the assurance of a machine.

That meant Herbert led a double life, the second half of which was lived in the night-time and in secret.

She felt honoured indeed by her brother's confidence. Life scintillated from day to day in ever brighter colours, in ever wider circles, in the midst of which like a sun she saw the words "good match" inscribed.

When, that same afternoon, she passed in front of

the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, outside which she saw a bridal autocar waiting, into which there stepped a lady in a gossamer dress trailing white clouds of filmy veil behind her, Stumpy, from among the crowd of the curious who had assembled to see the happy pair, pressed her hands over her heart and murmured uneasily:

“She has made a good match!”

Chapter Eight

A CONQUEROR'S NATURE

SUCH was the state of affairs when Theodore Gerberding, a business man, entered Stumpy's life.

He came to Dr. Shadow as a patient—so it happened just as her brother had hoped.

Obviously a man of substance, oozing wealth at every pore. Not that that was anything to wonder at. None but the well-to-do ever ventured up those marble steps to knock at Dr. Shadow's door.

The gold filling had come out of one of the patient's back teeth, and since he seemed a promising customer, the dentist was soon able to discover other damage which would need further visits.

As Stumpy was tucking the napkin round his neck, she became aware of two big, gentle eyes, as limpid as glass, seemingly with no lids at all, staring at her in owl-like amazement.

And when she came forward with the little wooden mallet, he turned his head in her direction so as not to lose sight of her, although the position made it impossible to work on the ailing tooth properly. Of course this was a sign of profound interest, but the persistence with which his eyes returned again and again to the contemplation of her bosom betokened the kindling of a fire in his heart such as Stumpy had had occasion to witness in other patients in the past.

When he was preparing to go, she took her first good look at him.

Nice. Undoubtedly nice. Very nice. Hair smoothly

brushed away from the clean-shaven face. A snub nose which by its very kindliness seemed to invite confidence. A mouth that smiled benevolently, even though it did not look as if it knew much about the art of kissing. A high, rather receding brow, which proclaimed conscientiousness.

As he took his leave, he bowed deeply in her direction. When Dr. Shadow whispered, "Money," she hurried after the patient in order to claim the fee then and there—a custom her employer insisted upon with all newcomers.

Especially when, as in the case of Herr Gerberding, the address was only that of a hotel, even though that hotel should be the "Adlon." People were so apt to forget little debts in the hurry of departure.

While Stumpy was counting the change for the note he had given her, she was again aware of those owl-like eyes fixed searchingly upon her form.

"Now for the usual question," she thought.

Yet no! Whether from a sense of caution or whether from some other motive, she knew not, he refrained, turned towards where Johnny stood with black paw cupped ready to receive a tip, then bowed once more in her direction as if she were a reigning queen, and disappeared through the doorway.

Stumpy did not take much stock of the encounter; it was so very like dozens of others she had experienced under this roof. Nevertheless when, a few days later, Johnny announced that Herr Gerberding had sent a message cancelling the appointment with Dr. Shadow, she could not completely ignore a feeling of regret, just as if the gentleman had inflicted a personal affront.

What was her astonishment when, that very day as

she was leaving work, she ran into a man who was pacing up and down the pavement obviously waiting for some one to join him; when this same gentleman raised his hat in courtly greeting; and when he turned out to be the very Herr Gerberding by whom she had considered herself aggrieved!

"I hope, my dear young lady," he said, "that you will excuse the liberty I have taken in waiting for you in the street in this way. It seemed to me foolish to pay the dentist another visit, seeing that I am quite satisfied with the condition of the rest of my teeth. Besides, I cannot get a word with you so long as I am in that chair. Even if I had an opportunity of addressing certain questions to you, such as asking you to believe that my intentions are strictly honourable, I should find it impossible to utter a word under such circumstances. I might have laid myself open to a rebuff—and that would have pained me in the extreme."

"Well, what do you want to say to me?" enquired Stumpy, at a loss to understand the situation in which she found herself. Not even the most assiduous of those who had paid their court while in Dr. Shadow's operating rooms had had the effrontery to molest her in the public street.

"Please allow me to walk part of the way home with you. I feel so very much 'twixt the devil and the deep sea here that all my powers of—of suggestion, shall we say, fail me."

He had not yet replaced his hat, and was still standing in a deprecatory attitude, so that passers-by began to look back at the couple.

Stumpy, aware of this scrutiny, and fearing lest her brother might drive up at any minute in the car,

did not hesitate any longer, but made a sign to her companion, and said:

"Come on, it's no use dawdling about here."

So they strolled off together, side by side, Herr Gerberding making a little shuffle with his feet in order to get into step with his companion. Then he began:

"First of all I must tell you that I am only a bird of passage here in Germany. Immediately after the war I went off to Argentina, for I was informed that most of the old relationships had been ruptured, and that men of energy and intelligence might do very well for themselves out there. Such news was highly attractive to a man of my disposition, for, let me tell you, young lady, mine is a conqueror's nature."

He paused for a moment as if to let this soak in, and meanwhile Stumpy was thinking: "Of course, if his is a conqueror's nature . . ."

Herr Gerberding continued:

"I may tell you that my expectations were not disappointed. Things were hard at the outset, that goes without saying. But I had taken a little capital with me to start me in business. And with my German efficiency—you understand . . . There were quite a number of German firms whose agencies and branches had lapsed during the war. So it became a question of writing to this firm and to that, of not being affronted if a letter met with a rebuff, and so on, until first one house and then another appointed me to act as agent for their interests. Soon I set up an office of my own, and my business grew and grew. Gradually the delightful conviction was borne in upon me that I was a pioneer, a pioneer of German culture. Yes, that's it!"

Stumpy was thinking: "I wonder what he's driving at in telling me all this?"

But Herr Gerberding was speaking once more.

"So long as one is actively on the job, all is well. But busy days are followed by lonesome evenings. There's not much doing at the German club, for most of the members are married, and I don't care for drinking or for playing poker. So I said to myself at last, 'Business is prospering,' said I. 'Especially the gramophones and mechanical washers, you're doing a roaring trade with them. You can rely on your travellers to carry on. How would it be if you went home to Germany, looked up a few more firms on the spot, and, at the same time, profiting by the occasion. . . .' How does it strike you, young lady?"

"I can't say that anything strikes me in particular," rejoined Stumpy. "I really don't understand."

"Didn't I tell you about my having a conqueror's nature?" asked Herr Gerberding modestly.

"You certainly did," confirmed Stumpy.

"But of course when one has to do with young ladies one is faced by another sort of proposition altogether. If one has not a proper introduction, it may be difficult to get into touch with the young lady who seems most attractive. That was something I had not foreseen in the Argentine. . . . And as I sit thinking in my room at the 'Adlon'—did I tell you I was staying there?"

"You gave it as your address," said Stumpy.

"Yes, yes, of course. And that's the right kind of address, too, for it always makes a good impression to put up at a first-rate hotel when one is trying to enter into new business relations. More use to one sometimes than the best of references. Let me see, now; what were we talking about? Ah, yes, I was say-

ing—in the evening when one has nothing but four bare walls around one, when one has written all the letters there are to write, and when the reading-room is empty—it's pretty dull for a fellow, eh? A man can't make haphazard acquaintances with females, you know. And yet, it would be so refreshing to hold tender converse, so to speak; to get to know one another . . . Then, again, driving about alone is no fun, especially when you have not your own auto with you, . . . Did I tell you, my dear young lady, that I possess two cars over there?"

"N-no," stammered Stumpy, greatly impressed.

"When that stopping came out of my tooth," Herr Gerberding resumed, "I asked the hotel porter to recommend me the very best dentist in Berlin. You see, I did not need to consider fees—although I must say I thought his charge rather stiff. That is why (I'm telling you this in confidence) I did not feel inclined to waste good money on a needless additional visit. . . . But what I wanted to ask was, whether I might have the pleasure of being introduced to your family. I do not think it necessary to emphasise the fact that my intentions are strictly honourable; that, indeed, I mean business."

Stumpy's cheeks flamed red as her new acquaintance uttered the last words.

The man stepping along beside her in his well-tailored clothes and patent-leather shoes was honestly and truly an aspirant to her hand. A wooer who, certainly, spoke of his "honourable intentions," and yet was far from being a "creeping Jesus" with dirty underlinen and soiled woollen socks.

A lover had suddenly descended from heaven, a lover for poor little Stumpy who was hardly more than a child! And what a nice one, too, not so very old,

at most half way through the thirties, a man who could afford to stay at the "Adlon," a man who lived in a country that sounds like fairyland, a man who owned two motor cars, who had travellers to work under him, who was doing a roaring trade in gramophones, mechanical washers, and the Lord knew what else besides. In a word, a man who answered in every detail to Herbert's description of "a good match."

How could a girl have ever hoped for such a piece of luck?

All these thoughts went flying through Stumpy's head while Herr Gerberding walked with mincing steps at her side, accommodating his pace to hers.

After a long pause, he took up his tale anew.

"I can quite well understand, my dear young lady, that my accosting you in the open street may appear a somewhat dubious proceeding, and may make you hesitate to grant my request. If it is really awkward for you to speak about me to your mother and father, I could write you a formal letter telling you my circumstances and prospects. Then you could show the letter to your parents, and according as it was read with sympathy or not make up your mind how to act. Should you be loath to throw the door of your home open to me yet awhile, we could meet, let us say, in some restaurant or the other, casually as it were. I could come to the table where you and your family were sitting, and say how d'ye do to you, and then you could introduce me; they might do me the honour of inviting me to take a place at your table . . . The whole thing would come about quite simply and naturally. Let me know how you feel about it, my dear young lady."

Dimly it began to dawn on Stumpy that it would be a good thing if she were to be a little stand-offish,

were to make herself less easy of access. She was careful, therefore, to betray nothing of her joyful emotion, and said hesitatingly:

"It's all—so sudden, Herr Gerberding. I don't know what my parents will say. And as for—myself—I—I . . ."

She did not trust herself to utter another word. Herr Gerberding waited patiently for a while, but, since she did not open her lips again, he said:

"Of course I do not expect you to give me your opinion on the matter yet awhile. As for my own suggestion—it must not be looked upon as a binding offer either. We must get to know one another first, mustn't we? But I should be very much obliged if you could see your way to giving me your name and address, otherwise—supposing that after reflection you think favourably of my suit—otherwise I shall not know where to send that letter I proposed writing."

"My name is—Annemarie—Lüdicke," announced Stumpy, her tongue playing her false as it always did when she had to throw her real name into the airs of heaven, thus causing her to stutter slightly as she spoke. Then, after a further slight hesitation, she gave the remainder of the address. It seemed to her that she was frivolously giving away a most carefully cherished secret.

Herr Gerberding gallantly raised his hat, and reciprocated:

"And I am Theodore Gerberding, at your service," and he uttered his first name with so much unction that he seemed to imply it held the utmost significance for the future.

Both were silent, oppressed by the momentous happenings of the past few minutes, and by the surmise of other momentous events to come.

At length he roused himself sufficiently to ask whether the plan he had suggested met with her approval.

Stumpy knew very well she would not be able to keep a quiet tongue in her head once she had got home. But the idea of receiving a formal letter presented itself as a dignified and imposing procedure, so she acquiesced in Herr Gerberding's little scheme.

"And now, my dear young lady, since matters have been so admirably arranged between us, I will no longer inflict my presence upon you. I particularly wish to avoid anything of a compromising nature henceforward. I owe that at least to the lady I hope at some future date to make my bride."

Again he raised his hat, and, without offering even to shake hands, turned on his heel and walked away.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," thought Stumpy, as she passed a hand over her flaming cheeks, "I shall burst if I can't tell them at once!"

For there remained at least two hours before closing time at her father's shop.

Half demented with excitement, Stumpy paced the streets, overtaking in her haste even the shortest-kirtled dames. She had no ears to hear what the passers-by might say to her, and in the end came to safe harbourage on Mamma's ample and kindly bosom.

"What else could I do?" Stumpy asked, as she wound up her tale. "His is a conqueror's nature. Yes, that's true enough. Didn't he say so himself?"

Chapter Nine

THE MARIENBAD CREAM-ALMOND-ORANGE PASTILLES

MY DEAR FRÄULEIN LÜDICKE,

The object of this letter is certainly not a frivolous one. I beg you to believe me when I say that I have turned the matter over carefully in my mind, and fully realise the consequences. Your maidenly demeanour, your charming appearance, your youth, have taken my heart by storm. And when I add that I am in comfortable circumstances, you must not think that I am unidealistic enough to suppose you likely to be influenced by so materialistic a consideration; but a reasonable competence is, of course, a foundation upon which idealism can flourish in greater freedom.

In consideration of this, I beg of you to take your parents into your confidence and to tell them what has already transpired between us. At the same time, I should be most grateful if they could see their way to arranging for a meeting so that we may get acquainted with one another. If they will be so kind as to suggest a place and a time, I shall not fail to be at the rendezvous.

Hoping for a favourable reply, believe me yours most devotedly unto death,

THEODORE GERBERDING.

This letter was read and reread by each member of the Lüdicke family.

Mamma and Papa had nothing but praise for it. Mamma thought the choice of words quite exquisite, as betokening a wide endowment of spiritual and emotional qualities. Papa appreciated the reference to

idealism, which reminded him of the lofty ambitions of his own youthful days.

Gudrun, on the other hand, was critical. "The only thing that completely satisfies me," she observed, "is the 'comfortable circumstances,' though as far as style is concerned the letter will pass muster. No doubt, it's worth having a look at him."

Herbert flicked the letter away from him with a contemptuous shrug, saying: "Small fry!"

As a result of prolonged deliberations, Papa took his pen in hand, and wrote as follows:

DEAR SIR:

In answer to yours addressed to my youngest, I have the honour to inform you that I shall escort my family to the Vienna Cafe, Kurfurstendamm 26, at 8 p.m. to-morrow. We shall be taking tea on the balcony.

Believe me,

Yours truly,

GOTTFRIED LÜDICKE.

Gudrun was of opinion that since eight in the evening was not tea-time, it would have been better to write "drinking" tea; but Mamma and Papa held to the verb "taking," as being so highly genteel. No one thought of asking Stumpy her opinion.

It was on a beautiful night in spring that the four—Herbert was, of course, "on duty," so could not attend—set forth to keep tryst at the fashionable cafe Papa had selected. Indeed, the place stood specially high in Papa's estimation, appearing to him the be all and end all of worldly achievement.

Although on entering he had cast a look of contempt at the display of cakes and pastries, he had to acknowledge as he made his way among the tables

that, in spite of the fine weather, the rooms were full to bursting. This vexed him not a little.

At length, however, a table was found to accommodate the party, and one which commanded an excellent view of the entry, so that they could keep an eye alert for new arrivals and their expected guest.

He came. They beheld making towards them a stoutish man of medium height, still fairly youthful in appearance, whose round face, somewhat pale at the moment from excitement, invited your confidence no sooner than you clapped eyes upon it.

Stumpy kicked her sister under the table, whispering: "That's him!" But she did not need to tell them, they knew at once.

Mamma got laboriously to her feet, and welcomed him with as much effusion as she did her favourite customers. Dear Papa, always diffident with strangers, ran his fingers through the wealth of his grey locks, plucked at his collar and set his necktie to rights, and then waited patiently until his wife should release their guest.

Herr Gerberding, meanwhile, was giving vent to his pent-up feelings, and Gudrun took a surreptitious look at her sister's suitor from under her eyelids, saying to herself as she smiled her inscrutable smile: "Is it worth while to filch this thing from her, or is it not?" And as the question passed through her mind, she assumed the expression of a languishing cherub.

Stumpy, poor child, sat mute and embarrassed, no one paying the slightest attention to her. Indeed, she seemed to have so little connexion with the remainder of the group, that a stranger would not have supposed to look at her that she was really the centre of all these polite goings-on.

Not until Herr Gerberding himself shook hands with

her and begged to be allowed to take a seat beside her did she emerge ever so slightly from her mortifying position to take a very secondary place among this party of elders.

Herr Gerberding picked up the bill of fare in order to make his choice; but dear Papa leaned over and whispered confidentially: "I should advise a ham sandwich same as we have. The cakes are very untrustworthy in this establishment."

The visitor bowed his appreciation, and promptly ordered the suggested refreshment, thereby on the instant capturing Papa's good will.

Little by little the tongues of the party were loosened, and conversation began to flow.

Herr Gerberding gave a short sketch of his life to date, depicted his rise to affluence in a land of untold possibilities, mentioned the names of a few of the big firms he was representing out there, some of them directly and some—Herr Gerberding paused, searching for the right word, but Papa nodded understandingly and said:

"Such a division of powers is often lucrative, I know," a statement which met with Herr Gerberding's gleeful corroboration.

Thus everything was going along as smoothly as could be desired, and though Herr Gerberding refrained this evening from speaking of his "conqueror's nature," he managed to bring in something about being a "pioneer of German culture." And it was true as far as it went; he was a pioneer; just as it was true that he was staying at the "Adlon," and not in some second-rate hotel or, even, in some cheap boarding-house.

Then Herr Gerberding invited them to come to lunch with him as soon as possible at his hotel, and the whole Lüdicke family respectfully, nay well nigh

anxiously, cleared their throats, for not one of them had ever entered those sacred precincts—unless, perhaps, Gudrun was to be excepted; but Gudrun preserved a demure silence.

After the first gasp of surprise had subsided, Mamma pulled herself together, remembering her dignity as housewife and mother, which threatened to be affronted unless Herr Gerberding should first have broken bread under the parental roof-tree. So it was arranged that the suitor should come to tea at an early opportunity.

“Then you’ll be able to sample some of our home-made cakes,” said Papa innocently. “In a cosmopolitan place like this one can get no idea of how delicious confectionery can be when it is really well made.”

This speech of Papa’s afforded an opportunity for enlarging upon the Lüdickes’ means of livelihood, and thus exchanging confidence for confidence, the new friend and the family found their way to a very amicable footing in the course of the evening.

The talk waxed even more interesting when Herr Gerberding asked Papa if his famous Marienbad Cream-Almond-Orange Pastilles could stand a journey in air-tight tins, could, in short, be exported to foreign climes.

Papa saw no reason whatever why the pastilles should suffer from a journey through the tropics. Whereupon, Herr Gerberding, bowing most politely, begged for the privilege of being the sole importer of the celebrated sweetmeats into Argentina, or, at least, of having an option on them for three months. After a moment’s reflection, Papa acquiesced.

As easily as winking, a most promising piece of business had been transacted, which paved the way for very pleasant family relations; those who knew dear

Papa well could recognise from the dreamy look which thenceforward veiled his eyes, and from the inspired way with which he ran his fingers through his hair, that his head was filled with world-embracing schemes wherein the name of Lüdicke was wafted to inconceivable heights of glory and renown.

Any promise of doing better business was welcome, for, in spite of a considerable turnover, in spite of Mamma's apparently inexhaustible fund of affability and Papa's nightly application to the arts of his trade, the Lüdicke pastrycook's and confectioner's shop only just paid for itself. What with increasing rents and cutthroat competition—was there not Schneider's in the Joachimsthaler Strasse and Wagenknecht's on the Olivaer Platz?—oh, it was enough to fill a man's heart with despair!

That night, as Stumpy was undressing, Gudrun sat on her sister's bed brushing her hair, and spoke as follows:

"You are now by far the most important person in the house, little Stumpy, and it's awfully necessary that none of us should blunder and make fools of ourselves. I'm not particularly versed in engagement technique, for my gentlemen friends have no serious intentions, thanks be! But I fancy my instinctive common sense will guide me in this instance. I suppose we've got to allow the antediluvian institution to run its idiotic course, for your friend is certainly a little behind the times. Whether Mamma is the best person to bring the affair to a satisfactory conclusion, I rather doubt, for her graciousness is a little overdone, you know. And as for me, you'd better keep me out of it! . . . I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but men are absurdly ready to fall to me, so that without

meaning to, quite involuntarily, I might turn the poor fellow's head. . . . Anyway, notwithstanding his differential attitude, notwithstanding his dread of compromising his future bride, we'll jolly well have to let you go about alone with him. I shall give you some tips later on as to how you should behave in his company. But, first of all, tell me, do you really like him?"

"Oh, Gudrun," exclaimed Stumpy, in a tone of sorrowful reproach.

"What's the idea in 'oh, Gudrun,' I should like to know? A girl may love one man and marry another; it's always been so, and will probably continue to be so for all time!"

"Would you like him for yourself?" asked Stumpy, in order to judge of her young man's value in Gudrun's eyes.

The elder girl laughed aloud.

"Thank goodness I'm not in question just now. I've got my own little peculiarities! Even the most cunning of sly dogs will never find out how I pass my days. Anyway, I've nothing against the man. His shoes fit him, so do his gloves. His necktie is o. k. As far as outward aspect is concerned, he seems to be quite an attractive being. But if you ask me about his brain . . . well, I should say: perhaps below average intelligence. Culture? Unfortunately your own does not bear very close investigation, does it? . . . The most important point to my mind is that a man of his years should have taken a fancy to a baby such as my little Stumpy still is. And this seems to me to imply that he doesn't know much about women, so that it's safe to risk being spliced up with him. You can take him by the collar, but don't tread on his corns—and you'll probably be quite happy with him."

Stumpy had a pang at her heart.

"I thought you'd stick by me," she wailed. "Instead, you have nothing but mockery and disdain for the whole affair."

And as she spoke the tears gushed down her cheeks.

Gudrun sprang towards her in alarm.

"What's up? I'm giving you the best of my wisdom and experience, and you. . . . Don't be such a silly Stumpy, darling!"

Saying which she flung her arms round her sister, and covered the girl's cheeks and throat with birdlike kisses.

Then she slipped into bed, where, as usual, she soon fell into the sound sleep which is the good fortune of those whose mind is untroubled.

Stumpy, however, meditated apprehensively in the darkness. Gudrun's doubts had undermined her happiness.

But when next morning a huge golden basket of red roses was delivered for her, roses not one of which had been mounted on wire, she threw all her worries to the winds, and hope once more irradiated her life.

The tea-party which took place two days later constituted a renewed triumph.

Even Herbert (who was usually on duty—really on duty—at this hour) had got the afternoon off in order to shine in the family firmament.

And, indeed, he did shine! When the two men were shaking hands, the younger had such a stylish air about him that he put his future brother-in-law quite in the shade.

Of course he never breathed a word about his job as chauffeur; and when Herr Gerberding enquired as to how he passed his time, Herbert cautiously hinted at

the possibility that his help in the work of Germany's reconstruction might take the form of an important post in the air-service—a suggestion which aroused a feeling of very natural surprise in the rest of his little audience.

The tea-table groaned under trophies of the paternal art. There was a plateful of Viennese banana puffs, and another of Parisian cream buns. Taking pride of place were the famous Marienbad Cream-Almond-Orange Pastilles, which were destined to introduce the Argentine barbarians to another phase of German culture—for, so far away as Argentina, no one would know that Marienbad was now lost to the Fatherland.

Herr Gerberding tasted of all the dainties set before him, and the manifest delight with which he smacked his lips was as genuine as were his secret glances of appreciation at Stumpy's youthful charms.

She was well aware of his observation, and was glad she had put on her pale-blue-and-silver evening frock for the occasion, though she knew quite well it had not been intended for afternoon wear. Still, the unwonted heat that May had brought in its train was ample excuse for such flimsy attire.

That she might just as well have sat there in her simplest house-frock and in no way diminished his delight in contemplating her, naturally never entered her head. But Mamma and Papa, whose eyes constantly travelled in her direction, knew well enough; and so did Gudrun, sitting at her side, and from time to time petting her by stroking her thigh.

Herbert, alone of all the company, did not trouble his head about her. Even Herr Gerberding was not of sufficient importance to fetter the young man's interest any longer. Soon he rose, and took his leave; whereat

every one heaved a mental sigh of relief, for his attitude of silent but critical detachment had weighed like a nightmare upon the spirits of the little party.

As soon as Herbert had disappeared, Herr Gerberding began an account of his present activities in Germany.

"Any one who thinks I am in Berlin for my pleasure is very much mistaken. I am seeing people from early morning until the end of the business day. Some of them tell me: 'I've already made my arrangements for an agent out there.' But when I ask what sort of sales they've had, they sing very small. Then's my chance for mentioning my own successes. Often that is enough; the game is won. Of course I don't want to oust anybody who's doing good work. I'm too much of a gentleman to do that; but, as you so justly remarked, Herr Lüdicke, there are certain sorts of division of powers that prove highly lucrative. Then there are options. One must keep one's eyes open for options. Even if the option is only a small one, it means one has at least made a start in the right direction. It goes without saying that an option must not force a man to put his hand into his own pocket. All the same one gains a sort of right over the business that way. How one makes use of such a right, and whether one makes use of it at all, are matters to decide at some future date."

Papa looked extremely serious while these last words were being spoken, and cast a rueful glance at the dish containing the Marienbad Cream-Almond-Orange Pastilles upon which Herr Gerberding had been granted a three-months' option. Should the son-in-law presumptive treat this option in a similarly haphazard way, one could hardly expect much benefit from the transaction.

Herr Gerberding was not obtuse. He instantly realised that he had blundered, and he hastened to repair any harm he might have done.

"You and I, my dear Herr Lüdicke, will be conducting our business on quite another footing, of course. Besides the chances of extensive calls for your goods over there are practically nil unless I bustle around a bit and put in a personal word now and then. Success depends on my own initiative and interest in the matter, and so far as my personal interest is concerned . . ."

"Would you not like to have a small 'option' on the hand of my sister?" asked Gudrun pertly, assuming her most innocently cherubic expression.

"Gudrun!" exclaimed Mamma, outraged.

Herr Gerberding was silent for a moment, not knowing what to say; then his face wrinkled with amusement, and was all smiles as he said:

"Not a bad joke! Not a bad joke at all! Yes, indeed, I should dearly like to have an option on your charming sister's hand. Or, what would be even better, I myself—I—I—I would—"

He broke off, completely discomfited.

Gudrun came to the rescue.

"What you probably meant to say, Herr Gerberding, is very seemly and correct. But the wish should have come from us in the first instance, and not from you. In so far as you deign to offer us your friendship, it is not we but you yourself who are giving *us* an option—as an earnest of your hopes and expectations. And now, dear Papa, if you feel it would be appropriate to the occasion, let us all have a taste of your delicious Malaga. That, at least, needs no option, for every one knows the value of such a vintage, and any who can afford it can have it."

Stumpy sprang eagerly towards the sideboard, poured the wine into the beautiful crystal glasses standing ready and handed them round on a tray. In his confusion Herr Gerberding nearly knocked his glass over, but, pulling himself together, he clinked glasses all round and proposed a toast: "To the future world-celebrity of Lüdicke's Cream-Almond-Orange Pastilles!" So eloquent, indeed, was the little speech, that Mamma and Papa expressed the greatest enthusiasm.

No sooner had the suitor taken his departure than both parents fell upon Gudrun and upbraided her for her ill-judged interference, which had nearly upset the apple-cart; and if Herr Gerberding had chosen to go away in a huff, no one could have thought the worse of him for it.

Gudrun shrugged her shoulders, smiling her enigmatical smile.

"I can't help being a beast!"

And that was the end of the matter.

Henceforward—who could fail to be aware of the fact?—the house of Lüdicke blossomed with a twofold happiness.

Chapter Ten

STUMPY BECOMES MORE AND MORE A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

THE luncheon party to which Herr Gerberding had invited the Lüdickes was to take place on the following Sunday.

Every one was greatly excited, and there was no end of a how d'ye do when it came to getting ready.

Seeing the extreme elegance of the hotel, Mamma considered the occasion demanded that she should don the low-cut dress she had worn last year at the Worshipful Company of Pastrycooks and Confectioners' ball. She was honestly hurt when Gudrun declared that should her mother rig herself out in such attire, she, Gudrun, would stay at home. Papa, too, was not satisfied with his appearance, and could not believe Herbert, who told him that the best thing would be the plain black jacket the confectioner usually wore when serving in the shop.

Nor could Herbert be persuaded to join the family.

"Four of us in a bunch will be quite enough, I assure you," he said.

So he had not tried to get an afternoon off. Besides Dr. Shadow always kept Sundays for paying calls. As Herbert informed them of this, he winked at Stumpy, giving her to understand that something peculiarly succulent was implied. But she paid no attention, for to-day all her thoughts and all her hopes were concentrated on the great event which was to raise her into higher spheres.

The clocks were striking twelve when the Lüdickes set out on their festive way. They took the tram as far as the Friedrichstrasse station, and went the remainder of the distance on foot, until they arrived in front of those gilded portals up to which Stumpy had often cast envious eyes as she passed by under the striped awning.

They pushed through the turning door, and entered the spacious, dimly-lighted hall, with its marble floor, its bronzes, its wide easy-chairs, its ebony wainscoting. Such magnificence was more than festive, it savoured of ecclesiastical splendour. Stumpy was overawed. People moved noiselessly to and fro, silent, or laughing quietly, cool and collected and dignified like gods. And all of them were so fabulously well dressed, so surrounded with a halo of distinction; how could a simple little girl like Stumpy ever dare to approach them on an equal footing?

Such, then, was the world in which Herr Gerberding lived!

Such, then was the world to which she, too, would one day belong, if all went well!

The idea was wholly beyond her grasp.

She turned towards her parents, and they appeared quite as much at a loss as she. There they stood in the middle of the sumptuous room, casting helpless eyes to right and to left. But no one seemed to notice the little group. All those who passed by seemed absorbed in their own idle affairs.

Gudrun was the first to come to her senses. She boldly approached one of the ebony compartments, behind the counter of which most polite young gentlemen were standing. She questioned one of them, and there was a whispered consultation in the background,

a consultation that seemed both weighty and full of mystery.

With a condescending nod to these young exquisites, Gudrun left the enquiry office and rejoined her family.

"It's all right," she said complacently, "they have gone to tell him we are here."

Thus saying, she led the way to one of the deep sofas into whose luxurious comfort Stumpy would never have dared to let herself sink uninvited.

Nor did she succeed in doing so this time, for just as she was about to venture, Herr Gerberding appeared in the doorway.

He begged them to forgive him for having kept them waiting; they were a trifle before time, and he had profited by the few minutes there were to spare in hunting up a suitable table. What a pity, seeing how balmy the air was, they could not lunch out of doors—and he pointed to a courtyard planted with flowers, thickly set with palms, and in the centre a Chinese pagoda. However, that was not the custom at the "Adlon"; besides it looked as if there might be going to be a shower, "and so I have chosen a table in the big dining-room. If you will be so good as to come this way . . ."

Thereupon, he offered his arm to Mamma and headed the procession, Papa and Gudrun following close at their heels, and Stumpy bringing up the rear, proud and delighted that she was permitted to be one of the guests at so august an entertainment.

"Oh, my," she thought as she passed on her way, "how lovely all these things are, to be sure!"

Here were show-cases, one after the other, brightly lit and displaying such incredibly beautiful wares, each seeming more lovely than its neighbour. And one had

not even time to look at them! Behind the glass were fruits, large and succulent, the likes of which she had hitherto only seen made in soap or in marzipan. Then there were two silver chariots, one with its roof shaped like a bell, the other laden with many-hued bottles and cut-glass wares, flashing in the artificial light.

It seemed to Stumpy that she was contemplating an altar dedicated to the Almighty.

There was also a niche illuminated with soft red lamps—in spite of its being noon of a summer's day. An exquisite couple was sitting at a miniature golden table. The young man seemed to be whispering sweet nothings into his companion's ear. How lovely, how elegant, how strange they looked; one could not help weaving a romance about them, just such a tale as one could read in instalments every day in the paper, something about American millionaires, and sailing with them aboard a snow-white yacht, and the daughter tumbling into the blue waters and being rescued by a young stoker or sailor who turned out to be the son of a German prince fallen upon evil days, whereupon . . . and so forth, and so on, to the inevitable conclusion.

Now they entered the dining-room.

As far as the eye could reach, everywhere it saw purple: purple carpet into which the feet sank; chairs and sofas upholstered in purple; purple screens, purple curtains. And, how strange, the roof was made of glass. Had it been transparent, one might have imagined oneself lying at the bottom of the sea, blissfully at rest!

Blissful repose seemed to encompass every object and every living person that met her gaze. Noiselessly they glided over the carpet, bland and dignified gentlemen. They looked like ambassadors or ministers at

some important State function. They bent down and whispered to the guests and made notes on little tablets; or, with courtly gestures, would summon one of their confrères to their side, and he, holding a silver platter on his hand, would adjure the guest to partake. He reminded Stumpy of a priest offering sacrifice.

The same ceremony ran its course at the table where Stumpy, with Herr Gerberding and her family, was enthroned.

"Enthroned," yes, that was the word. For here, at last, she was no longer a superfluous member of the party and unworthy of attention. As at her first dancing lesson, so now, she sat enthroned like a little queen, graciously accepting the homage of her companions, and completely absorbed in one single idea: "Am I looking all right?"

It seemed to her, too, that the bland and dignified gentlemen who deigned to wait on the company were paying her distinctive attention. Their faces expressed a humble concern as they bent towards her, smiling, and beseeching her to partake of this dish or that, as if she would bestow a most gracious favour upon them by her acceptance.

But she hardly knew what she was eating, so filled to overflowing was her heart with the joy of gazing at all this beauty and the delight of being in such a heavenly place.

Yet the dishes were strange, their very names making her tremble with joy—if not from anxiety, lest she should not pronounce them correctly.

Finally she settled this difficulty by pointing to Mamma's plate and saying: "Me too, please." Then everything went smoothly.

No time, to-day, for much conversation. Mamma

and Papa were as tongue-tied as she, and Herr Gerberding tried in vain to find a subject that would set the ball rolling. Ever and again he came back to the theme of the threatening rain-storm, and that one was quite as comfortable here as outside, and that anyway the great windows were all wide open, and so on.

Gudrun was the first to break the spell. She began talking about the jolly things which could be done of an evening in one fashionable resort and another, and her knowledge of such places seemed both deep and wide. Herr Gerberding was profoundly impressed, and begged for the honour of squiring the two sisters to a dance.

Thereupon Gudrun assumed a preoccupied air, saying she had no time for dancing just now, that she was absorbed in her studies, and that he must be content with Annemarie's company. She was sure her parents would have no hesitation in confiding their younger daughter to his care for an evening's pleasure. . . .

Herr Gerberding bowed his appreciation, and on the spot he arranged to come and fetch Stumpy to take her out.

Thus Stumpy's fate for the following weeks was decided. Her evenings henceforward were one long and glamorous string of pleasure and enchantment.

For the first time in her life she was entrusted with a latchkey, and she made such good use of the privilege that often by the time she got home she actually found Gudrun in bed.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Herr Gerberding proved a very entertaining companion. He seemed incapable of shaking off his excessively formal ways, and not once did he ask for a kiss or offer any other kind of endearment. They could easily pass as strangers whom a none too happy chance had flung

together. Indeed, they looked decidedly bored with one another!

But any disappointment in regard to such personal relations was swallowed up in the wonderful impressions which crowded in upon Stumpy from day to day.

She lived in a whirl of festivities. They went to the Summer Theatre, and to the cabarets, and for picnics in the country, and for boating excursions. They made themselves at home in every conceivable kind of restaurant. Did they not even dine one evening on board a real ship which was anchored in the middle of Lake Wann? After that, Stumpy was in a greater hurry than ever to be on the huge ocean-going liner which would carry her far away to her new home.

But the delight of delights was the dancing-hall. She was even bored by the theatre, if they were going to dance afterwards, and longed for the last fall of the curtain, that they might hasten away to the home of tango.

Herr Gerberding was far from being an expert dancer, and often Stumpy looked at other pairs with longing eyes and beating heart. They seemed to glide so smoothly, their bodies melting into one another in a perfect rhythmic movement.

All the same, Stumpy hardly knew if she were flying or on her feet as she strolled down to the polished floor leaning on Herr Gerberding's arm. She was no longer dumpy little Stumpy with short girlish legs, but a tall slender-stalked flower; she was a lovely butterfly which spread its wings in vain, for the ponderous dancer whose arm held her so tightly kept her feet shackled to the earth.

There were others who felt this besides herself, for when her eyes encountered other eyes among those

who were sitting out the dance, she could detect a look of friendly appreciation as they followed her round the hall. Soon, these glances became a need to her, and when they were not forthcoming, she would once more feel oppressed and humiliated.

Then something tremendous happened, something that took her completely out of herself.

Chapter Eleven

A DREAM IN THE MOONLIT DANCING-HALL

ONE night in June, Herr Gerberding took Stumpy to a specially select place, a place no one was allowed to enter without a personal introduction, for it sheltered, in addition to a superb dancing-hall, a proprietary gaming-house whose owner wished to give it the semblance of a club. Distinguished foreigners staying at a fashionable hotel could get an introduction from the hall porter and were always welcome.

As one entered, the natural summer night was left behind and one stepped into an artificial summer night.

Blue and silver! Silver stars in an azure domed ceiling looking like the vault of heaven itself. Silver palms on a dark-blue background. The whole place flooded with moonlight, a silvery mist softening every contour. Men moving about like phantoms. Women like disembodied spirits or living marble, according as they were caught in the noose of silvery light or glided back into the shadows.

The room melted away into vista upon vista. It seemed to stretch into infinitude. Stumpy felt as if she were on a fairy isle in an enchanted sea; bewitched, she stood there, hardly daring to breathe.

No voice was raised, no ugly sound penetrated; the music was like the low purr of the cicadas and the far-away murmur of gentle waves, and the whirl of the dancers resembled the dying sigh of the wind among the reeds.

"Oh," breathed Stumpy, clinging involuntarily closer

to her companion's side, "where have you brought me?"

"To a proper den of ghosts," he answered, laughing down at her; but even he did not venture to raise his voice.

Some one clad entirely in white led them to a little terrace where there was an unoccupied table.

Spellbound, Stumpy looked down into the mysterious abyss, filled with gyrating shades.

A bottle of champagne appeared from nowhere, ordered by no one. Stumpy drank, to give herself courage; she drank slowly and deeply. But when Herr Gerberding invited her to dance, she felt it would be sacrilege, and refused point-blank.

Then, suddenly, the glamorous quiet was roughly broken in upon.

Red flames sprang up, dazzling the eyes with their crude brilliancy, and the hall was revealed to be an ordinary place thickly encrusted with gold paint. At the same time, a deepening roar of jazz was let loose, hurting sensitive nerves with its stringency.

Ear and eye were simultaneously assaulted with the full blast of the flashy, barbaric noises our war-weary "civilised" world has adopted as a stimulus to its flagging energies.

"The witchery has flown away," sighed Stumpy.

But even now she refused to dance, so strong and so sad was still the impression of that past beauty.

Then she uttered a cry.

There, among the dancers, one figure in especial had caught her attention. She had followed it in its gyrations, and all at once she had recognised that it could be no other than—Herbert.

"What's the matter?" enquired Herr Gerberding, in some alarm.

She had an instinctive feeling she would do better to keep a quiet tongue. But she could not think of a plausible fib, and she had to explain her exclamation, so she stammered out:

"My brother."

Her words sounded almost like a confession of guilt.

Herr Gerberding was alert with curiosity.

"Where? Where? Where?"

Since it was impossible to single out Herbert among so many men who all looked as like as peas, Stumpy chose rather to describe the lady he was dancing with—a shimmering golden creature who lay caressingly in his arms.

"He certainly does not dance badly," said Herr Gerberding.

Stumpy watching gave vent to a joyous cry that sounded like the call of a bird. She felt that never before had she been privileged to see such perfect dancing.

Then, suddenly, the tango came to an end.

"Shall I go and fetch him?" asked Herr Gerberding.

"Oh, no, please don't," besought Stumpy catching her breath in unaccountable anxiety.

But the recognition had been mutual, and Herbert disappeared from among the dancers.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear! What's going to happen now?" thought Stumpy for she was sure he would ask her to dance with him, and she was equally sure that she was far too gawky ever to be at ease in the arms of so perfect a dancer.

He came towards her, looking far from pleased to meet his sister in such a place. He frowned and bit his lip.

"How on earth have you found your way here?" he asked roughly.

Herr Gerberding gave the necessary explanation and then, as was natural, he added:

"And now brother and sister must take a turn together."

Herbert looked down at Stumpy, doubt in his eyes.

"Of course I'm not good enough for him," she thought dejectedly.

After a moment's hesitation, he took her by the hand, and she followed his lead in silence.

Nor did they exchange a word as they went down the steps to the dancing-floor.

When his arm slipped round her, she trembled in every limb.

"It won't be worth his while . . . He'll soon take me back to my chair . . ."

But hardly had they danced a few steps when she said to herself with conviction:

"This is what I have been pining for so long!"

At first she felt as if she were swimming, floating on the top of sustaining water; then they glided away to one side, and swung this way and that. Her feet, it seemed, had left the solid earth, and therewith all her cares and anxieties had vanished into thin air. Was she not flying, really and truly flying, as one flies in a dream?

Or had she already experienced something of the sort in real life?

"I say, who'd have thought you could do this," she heard Herbert murmur.

Then she felt a gentle pressure beneath her shoulder-blade, and instantly knew that he meant her to change the figure of the dance.

She obeyed, wholly yielding to his wishes.

He sped away from her, then clasped her once more to his side; he knelt before her; he raised her on high; he allowed her to drop lightly to the floor; he rolled her up along his outstretched arm; he made her twirl and circle; he threw her up on to his shoulder, so that she sat triumphantly aloft.

It reminded her of old days, when she was still a child, and he had made her play ball in time to his whistling. And it was from this that had come her memory about flying; only that to-day the flying was inexpressibly more lovely and more filled with artistry.

She sat enthroned upon his shoulder, her arms passionately flung out and reaching heavenward, when suddenly the question flashed through her head:

"Good gracious, what the dickens am I doing?"

But before she had time to let her thoughts run, Herbert had given the dance a new turn which set her body a fresh problem to solve.

It was but a moment in time, yet for her that moment seemed eternity. Then, abruptly, the band ceased playing.

As if awakening from a dream, she found herself standing in the middle of the room. Once again she was poor little Stumpy, covered with confusion because she had dared to dance with so accomplished a partner.

Then people began to clap, and there were cries of appreciation from all sides. Again she felt troubled and alarmed, for when she raised her eyes she found she was the centre of a circle of admiring faces.

She and Herbert had for some minutes been the only dancers. The other guests had given up the floor to her and her brother. Onlookers in the gallery and the boxes had risen to their feet to get a better view.

The place was filled with the sound of clapping hands, and voices raised in congratulation.

"I wish I were outside," thought Stumpy, on the verge of tears.

Then she was aware of Herbert's voice in her ear, saying:

"Top hole! But mum's the word at home. I've got a job here. Have to dance with the ladies who have no partners. . . . The lady I was dancing with when you spotted me is a colleague . . . Better not say anything about all this to your young man . . ."

As he spoke the last words, they came up to where Herr Gerberding sat. His face was flushed, and he obviously was at a loss what to say. He was bewildered, hesitating between whether to scold Stumpy for her display or to praise her unexpected skill.

And all the while the clapping went on vigorously.

"Won't you sit down with us, Herr Lüdicke?" asked Herr Gerberding, pointing to the champagne in its ice-bucket. He was not at all certain what the brother's surname might be.

But with the same nonchalance he had displayed at his first rencontre with Stumpy's suitor, Herbert declined the present invitation.

"Awfully sorry, but I've got a lady in tow. I must go and see after her."

Thereupon he vanished.

The box occupied by Stumpy and her squire was still surrounded by eager and admiring spectators.

"Please take me home," said she, and Herr Gerberding was only too pleased to comply.

At first he walked silently beside her. After a while he began:

"Dear Fräulein Annemarie, I have made acquaintance to-day with a totally different aspect of your

character, an aspect which, in certain respects, makes me uneasy. Now don't, please, take me up wrong. I do not love you any less in consequence. Quite the contrary. I have an even greater admiration for you. But I cannot help asking myself whether, with such extraordinary gifts as you possess, you will be content to pass your life in the company of a plain business man like myself. Will you not, rather, find a middle-class environment irksome in the extreme? And will you not feel it impossible to acquiesce when I ask you, as I do now ask you, never again to exercise your art?"

It seemed to Stumpy as if a wonderful gift bestowed on her from heaven was being wantonly destroyed. Still, this man beside her was her fate. There was no object in going against him. So she answered quite sturdily:

"What you are kind enough to call my 'gift' is as great a surprise to myself as to you. I never suspected its existence till now. The dancing was absolutely unintentional on my part, I merely lent myself to my brother's wishes. I don't think I could ever repeat such a performance. So I shall not find it hard to grant your request."

Herr Gerberding expressed his gratitude by pressing her arm as it lay in his. That was the greatest liberty he ever allowed himself.

But Stumpy was excogitating some means which would enable her to escape her undertaking. Her pulses were still throbbing with the intoxication of her recent achievement, and behind the delight there lurked a foreboding pregnant with destiny.

Next day, Dr. Shadow looked at her gloomily. He had daimonic glints in his eyes, an expression she had learned to dread.

"What's happened to you, darling?" he asked. "You have become so beautiful of a sudden."

He wanted to caress her, but Stumpy, who usually made no effort to resist his advances, quietly turned his arm aside.

"Please, please," she said, clasping her hands.

Spoilt darling that he was, he frowned, took offence, and coldly ordered that the first patient should be shown in.

For the moment she was free of him.

She would have given much for an immediate talk with Herbert, who had now assumed the aspect of a hero in her eyes. But she knew she would have to wait until Sunday.

At last Sunday came.

He made his appearance in the sitting-room earlier than was his wont. The "perfect gentleman" as he should be dressed in the forenoon! He looked like a tailor's model, one of those exquisite figures to be seen in such a fashion paper as that which Mamma was at the moment studying with so much edification. From the distance came the sound of Gudrun's practising, while Papa was absorbed in the concoction of new recipes.

No chance of a private talk here.

But Herbert was rarely at a loss.

"I wish you'd come a bit of the way with me, Stumpy, old thing. I do so want to tell you something."

They had hardly set out, when he came to the point.

"Now you know how I spend my nights, and, since, in a manner of speaking you are my accomplice, I owe it to you to be rather more explicit. . . . So far as

money goes, I don't need to do it, for the Doctor pays me handsomely, and I can contribute generously to my board and lodging at home. . . . But I'm a man of taste, and having got into the extravagant ways of the upper classes I cannot shake them off now. . . . I can't honestly say that my present job is a very noble one, yet there's not much difficulty in talking oneself into a belief that it is not so bad. Besides, in the background there is always a possibility of that 'good match' I once spoke about to you. You are making one, I hope—although he's not a very big fish, to be sure. And I want to make one too. There are no end of girls to be found in the dancing-halls having a good time at their fathers' expense, and there are enterprising widows whose late husbands worked themselves to death coining money. They come to Berlin, and all they want to do is to dance, dance, dance. The whole world is bitten with this craze for dancing. Also they look forward to a little love-making. Yes, very decidedly, they want that! And if a chap happens to have the right sort of legs for dancing the Charleston, and rejoices in a not altogether unprepossessing personality, it's not so easy to be rid of the fair dames once a fellow has made their acquaintance."

"I fancy you aren't so keen to be rid of them are you?" Stumpy ventured to interpose.

"You are right. Very right indeed from my point of view. There's only one danger which I find it rather hard to explain to such an innocent lambkin as yourself. Do you happen to know what we mean when we speak of a man as 'a lady's lapdog,' or as her 'gigolo'?"

"N-no," answered Stumpy.

"But you know what a 'cocotte' is, don't you?"

"Of course," rejoined Stumpy, proud of her knowledge of the world.

"Well, it's the same thing—only the other way round. And a man who acts in a certain way towards women is very easily mistaken for something of that sort. As a matter of fact, I know gentlemen of the first water who keep themselves in funds sponging on their lady friends. That's a little peculiarity we owe to the aftermath of the war. I'm not apt to be troubled with scruples; but somehow, in this matter, I haven't been able to bring myself to adopt such expedients. And as soon as I am aware that one of my dames is on the look for a chap of that sort, I'm through with her. I'm as pernickety as the most uninitiated of girls in such matters. If they come to me with honest proposals—I'm their man all right. 'La bourse ou l'amour,' is my motto."

Stumpy who had been rendered more and more uncomfortable by her brother's speech, heaved a sigh of relief as he uttered the last sentence or two.

"It's awfully jolly of you to tell me all this," she said. "But I don't understand why you are taking me into your confidence—I can't do anything to help you."

Herbert stopped short in his stride, and placed another cigarette between his lips.

"Who knows? A time may come when you can be of the utmost use to me. Or vice versa—that comes to the same thing in the end!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Stumpy somewhat hesitantly.

"You don't need to understand just yet, little silly—I'll tell you all about it when the time comes. If you succeed in making your 'good match,' you will of course be able to do me a good turn now and again;

we agreed upon that long ago. But I don't mean that for the moment. What I mean is— Oh, how can I explain without frightening you? We haven't come to that yet. So let's drop the subject meanwhile. All you need worry about now is not to blab to anyone about my dancing. I want you to get your little man to promise to hold a still tongue in his head. I hope you've impressed that on him."

"Why do you call him a 'little' man?" asked Stumpy, aggrieved. "Seems to me he's quite as big as yourself."

Herbert laughed mockingly.

"Go home, you little dear. People are beginning to stare. They probably think you are my lady love! And you haven't even been my partner—not properly, I mean. Good-bye!"

He patted her cheek, and left her to her disappointment.

What a lot she would have given for a word of praise, just a little word of praise she could have treasured in her heart. But he had gone off, and never once mentioned her dancing.

She was puzzled as to what he had meant by the word "partner." She thought and thought, but the more she thought the less she could understand what was implied.

Thus the great evening gradually lapsed into a dream, a lovely, far too lovely dream ever to have been a reality.

Chapter Twelve

STUMPY MEETS SOMEBODY AT HERR SAMUEL'S

IN the beginning of July, Herr Gerberding had to absent himself for a time from Berlin, for he wished to cast an eye on the industries of the west country, and see if there were any options worth striving for.

"Most of the firms have offices in Berlin," he explained, "but it is always best to get in touch with the heads whenever one can. They recognise at once whom they are dealing with, and then it is merely a matter of arrangements between gentlemen, arrangements which make no binding conditions and therefore leave one a free hand to deal with affairs as occasion arises."

Stumpy, much impressed with this fresh proof of his "conqueror's nature," saw him off at the station, and felt a glow of pride that she was among those whose friends were travelling first class and had a reservation in the wagon-lit besides.

Until further notice, her nightly outgoings were at an end.

The fashionable eating-houses and dance-halls faded away into a vision of some lost paradise, and cold suppers in the home circle resumed their place in her life.

"I say, Kid," said Gudrun one morning, "you're getting stuffy. We must think of something to cheer you up. I have just got to know a young man, rich fellow it seems, and a jolly companion for a spree. But I don't feel I really know him well enough yet; any way I have not decided in my own mind whether

he's the right sort or no. So I'm not inclined to visit him alone in his flat, and I've asked him to arrange a little tea-party. Three couples, no more. Perhaps an excursion to the country afterwards. He's to invite the men and one of the girls. You are to make up the list. At that sort of razzle-dazzle, two sisters can safeguard one another, and when the fizz is getting into every one's head we can watch out to make sure that nothing disorderly occurs. Kissing's allowed, but everything else is strictly taboo."

"What does 'taboo' mean?" asked Stumpy, not at all decided whether she was going to accept or not.

"It means: 'That's enough'; or: 'Please leave me in peace, Mr. So-and-So'; any phrase is good that will safeguard a girl's virtue."

Stumpy was satisfied, and agreed to go.

Dr. Shadow was somewhat surprised when, on helping Stumpy into her nurse's overall, he caught a glimpse of her round white shoulder. The fact was that Gudrun had arranged to meet her at five when her day's work was over, and there would be no time to go home and change.

He asked her why she was in evening dress, and she answered:

"Because of the heat."

The doctor was vastly pleased, and kissed her arm all the way up from the wrist to the curving muscles at the shoulder. She made no protest, but it gave her scant pleasure, for, as the days passed, she grew more and more indifferent towards the man.

The day of her party with Gudrun brought very few patients to the dentist's chair, and this was a blessing, for Stumpy was able to be ready on the stroke of the clock and did not have to keep her sister waiting.

Gudrun hailed a taxi, and just as they were starting they exchanged nods with Herbert, who drove up in the doctor's resplendent Buick.

Stumpy quickly turned her eyes away, for she felt ashamed of being seen in anything so humble as their present conveyance. Herr Gerberding had always hired a private car for their excursions, since he hated taxis.

Gudrun's new friend was called Samuel, and he lived in a villa which had belonged to his late father. Through the old man's death he had become the owner of a renowned cotton mill, and of two estates in the country which his father, a shrewd man of business, had bought for a song in the days of the inflation. These details were imparted to Stumpy as the two sisters were driving along to Grunewald.

It was Stumpy's first experience of a bachelor party, and she felt a trifle shy till she remembered that her host's name was Samuel. That made her easy at once, since Jews had a special liking for her—she had learned that much from her experience of them in Dr. Shadow's consulting room.

The house was a lovely one, built a little way back from the road and covered with rambler roses, just as you see in the picture of the Sleeping Beauty.

As the front door opened to admit you, the first thing you caught sight of was a marble fountain fashioned into a niche in the wall, framed in gold mosaic encrusted with blue and lilac and purple disks. It looked as if the whole thing were lit up from behind, so full was it of iridescence.

They were shown into a great room that must surely be meant for your devotions, for the ceiling was of gold and there were golden images and a golden screen before the high altar. There were *priedieux*

all round and a baptismal font and church lanterns raised so high aloft that you had to crane your neck to see them.

Although it was still broad daylight without, no glimmer was allowed to penetrate here, for heavy purple curtains shrouded the windows. But an amber-coloured illumination came from frosted lamps, and each of the pictures was lighted up, though it was impossible to say whence the effulgence came.

Stumpy felt so queer that she would have liked nothing better than to turn tail. Even Gudrun, who was not readily surprised at any mortal thing, stood silent and thoughtful now. However, it was not long before the spell was broken.

The door leading from a neighbouring room was roughly flung open, and against a background of sunshine a robust young man was silhouetted.

"Hullo! Who's this?" he asked, without further ado, nodding towards Stumpy.

And as Gudrun introduced her sister, their host's eyes sparkled and took on the peculiar expression Stumpy had so often noticed before in men's glances at a first meeting.

He was certainly a nice-looking young fellow, with agate-coloured eyes and smooth black hair brushed straight back from a dome-shaped brow that seemed to be radiant with laughter. Well-groomed, elegant, and scented to perfection, thought Stumpy. He shook hands, and said:

"Come along quickly! We're all waiting for you."

With unceremonious freedom he flung his arms round their shoulders, and guided them into a room that was flooded with light.

At first Stumpy could distinguish nothing but three figures bowing as they were introduced.

"Doctor Dora Keilholz, Doctor Lavalles, Herr von Nadolny," she heard her host saying.

Three hands were thrust into hers successively, and she shook them automatically. Then she sat down, and a cup of tea at once monopolised her attention.

"Agriculturists are in the majority to-day!" Again it was her host who spoke.

"Oh, oh," she heard a woman's deep-toned voice protest, "you and I are only half-way houses!"

Stumpy looked up, and her eyes enfolded the vision of a beautiful girl, whose face was the colour of the finest ivory, but whose eyes were masked behind a pair of dark-rimmed glasses.

"We're all of us not much more than half-way houses, excepting Nadolny. But we may be allowed to count the two doctor halves as one whole, I submit, and a terribly learned pair they make." Then, turning towards the sisters Herr Samuel explained: "She knows all there is to know about agricultural chemistry, and now she's swotting at economics."

"What's the good of stuffing such things into a woman's head?"

Again Stumpy looked up at the speaker, whose voice, this time, had grated somewhat on her ears. She saw another well-groomed, dark-haired man, no longer young, for the close crop above the temples was already grizzled. This must be Dr. Lavalles. He wore a monocle, looked a little blasé, was extremely self-possessed. Herbert had told her that self-possession was a man of the world's first requisite—and he tried to model himself upon his ideal in this respect.

"You girls may study as much as you please," Lavalles continued, "but you cannot get away from the fact that love is your main business in life."

Young Dora laughed.

"You are mistaken, Dr. Lavalley," she rejoined defiantly. "Men are dominated by the division of labour, in these days, and the principle applies to the realm of women as well. Women as a species, may perhaps be made for love, though in truth the prevailing itch for work has infected her too. But for a serious woman, one who is inspired with a genuine desire for knowledge, there's no time for love. Then, as to these words 'main business'. If I'm to talk of my 'main business' in life—well, my main business is agricultural research, and not so much, as hitherto, from the agriculturist's point of view as from the economist's. Our experiments in this field must give rise to beneficent legislation which will, of necessity, undermine the extant foundations of proprietary rights. Thus a new epoch in the organisation of production will inevitably begin. I am determined to do my utmost to help towards such a change; and here you come to me, my dear Dr. Lavalley, and talk to me about love!"

Stumpy pricked up her ears as the lady spoke and stared at the stranger point-blank. She had never in her life heard a woman speak in such terms, nor had it ever entered her head to imagine that a woman could speak like that at all. How proudly Miss Dora spurned love! Yet Stumpy had always thought it constituted the highest aim of a woman's life. And how beautiful the young doctor was as she gave vent to her revolutionary ideas! Her cheeks had flushed ever so slightly as she spoke, so that her complexion looked like the faintest of pink blushes on the petal of a tea-rose, and her thin lips pouted adorably. Had it not been for those horrid spectacles, the face would have been perfect.

Dr. Lavalley sipped his tea, ruminating the while how best to answer. Then, with a rather condescending air, he said:

"Of course, my dear Fräulein Keilholz, your enthusiasm disarms me. Indeed it is sufficient to disarm the fiercest of opponents. And when the charms of womanhood—to which you pay such scant respect—are added to genuine enthusiasm, an opponent has not a leg to stand upon. I have just sufficient strength left to make one little objection if I may. These new regulations by which you set such store, may be quite excellent, and their introduction thoroughly justified. But might it not be that, as you yourself seem to surmise, the same results could be achieved through gratifying the 'stupid' interests of private property without any interference on the part of the State? Such things eventuate instinctively—just as love, which you so profoundly despise, is an outcome of one of the primal impulses of our nature."

Stumpy was furious. Had his hair been less close-cropped, she would have derived infinite satisfaction from pulling it. How dared he speak so impudently in response to a speech which had inspired her with such awed reverence? She would have rushed to Fräulein Dora's rescue had the latter not been fully able to take care of herself. The smiling answer came without an instant's hesitation:

"Even if you were an expert in such matters, and should prove a thousandfold right, my dear Dr. Lavalle, it would be well to probe these famous instincts, and find out how far they are trustworthy guides. But you are by no means an expert. Although you are yourself a landowner, as is also Herr Samuel, you are neither of you anything other than dilettantes, business men playing the game of landed gentry. Let's hear what Herr von Nadolny has to say; he, at least, has had the advantage of first-hand experience."

She turned to the third man whom Stumpy had not

noticed up till now, for he sat in the shadow near the window, himself not much more than a shadow, silent and attentive. As Stumpy followed the direction of Fräulein Dora's glance, she encountered two eyes fixed upon her in a complete self-forgetfulness. Her heart began to thump, without her being in the least able to explain why. Then it occurred to her that she knew these eyes, had seen them before.

Silence followed Fräulein Dora's appeal, for Herr von Nadolny had been so immersed in the contemplation of Stumpy, that he had not heard a word of the previous exchange of hostilities.

The party laughed heartily at having caught him in the act, for the ardour of his gaze took some while to extinguish. Gudrun joined in the merriment, but immediately rallied to her sister's aid, placing an arm about the girl as if to protect her.

"Love at first sight," some one exclaimed in gentle raillery.

Poor Stumpy was so overwhelmed with shame that she feared she would burst into tears.

When she had summoned up courage to look at the man a second time, she realised who he was.

It was her friend of the encounter in the Savigny-platz. It was he! It was he! None other than he! She would have recognised him anywhere; he was just as she had always imagined him.

"For God's sake, pull yourself together," she said to herself.

At last he awakened from his trance; his eyes travelled round the circle; he passed his hand over his forehead.

"I'm so sorry! I seem to have been wool-gathering," he said apologetically.

Yes, that was indeed his voice, the voice she re-

membered, with its bugle tone. The sound had been in her ears ever since she had last heard it.

"Don't bother, we had no intention of disturbing you," said their host. "Let us place the two side by side so that their destinies may be fulfilled."

Again the merriment was general.

Stumpy cast imploring eyes at Gudrun, silently beseeching her sister to come to her assistance once more. The elder girl was not slow to understand.

"Let her be. She's only a kid, and knows nothing of life as yet. She takes everything so seriously."

Gudrun pulled Stumpy towards her, and kissed the fair head. Soon Stumpy felt reassured, and she thought:

"If only I had the courage I'd say to him: 'Come, we'll get out of this!' Then he'd take me by the hand, and we'd be outside . . ."

But she knew that such a move on her part was impossible, and she accepted the teasing with a good grace.

Even he tried to laugh with the rest of the company. Then, since the others insisted, he hesitated no longer and took the vacant seat by her side, while she thrilled at his proximity.

"Now, I have a guardian angel on either hand," she thought contentedly, and, though she still felt somewhat shy, she was able to join in the laughter of her companions.

Since there was no longer any reason to tease, the talk soon slipped into other paths, such as the rights of women, and the advantages accruing to girls from the present ordering of society.

Gudrun took part in the discussion, saying:

"I myself am a thorough-going modern; and yet when I remember how in other days two young people,

without the slightest qualm, joined forces for life, knowing nothing about one another except that they were 'in love', I can't help feeling rather sorry that those simple days have passed beyond recall. It makes me feel as if for a second time mankind had been shut out of paradise."

"You can save your compassion," exclaimed Herr Samuel. "It is not forbidden to young couples to make their own Garden of Eden just as our primal parents did."

"I have my own paradise," thought Stumpy joyfully. "I'm sitting right in the very middle of it!"

She would have given much had she possessed spirit enough to caress with her elbow the elbow of her beloved neighbour. But she did not dare.

Dr. Lavalley was speaking.

"No difficulty at all in doing that; only, unfortunately such birds of paradise are as extinct as the dodo. I'm not talking of physical virginity—that has always been a matter it was impossible to insist upon, at any rate where the male sex was concerned. What I am referring to is spiritual virginity, and this, too, nowadays has been lost by both men and women, lost, indeed, while the youngsters were still at their mother's breast or, rather, since suckling is out of date, on the bottle. When two young people join forces in holy matrimony in these times, neither of them can boast of being intact. Sexual enlightenment with its consequent experimentation, passionate friendships among schoolmates, love-intrigues of every sort, feelers put out in search of wealthy suitors, and, above all, adventures of the street and the taxi—and what girl escapes them . . . ?"

He broke off, and Stumpy felt an icy grip at her heart. Yes, she had stretched out feelers in Herr

Gerberding's direction, had been only too successful in capturing a wealthy suitor. Above all there was Dr. Shadow, the fascinating dentist, who held her best gifts as booty in his greedy maw.

But worse was to come, and Stumpy, overpowered with shame, longed for the earth to open and swallow her up.

Her host was pointing towards her, saying:

"Just look at that child. How pretty she is. Do you mean to tell me she has not escaped this universal defilement? Can you really suppose that she has had the sort of promiscuous experiences of which you talk?"

Stumpy felt as if she were running the gauntlet. But Fräulein Dora suddenly got up and came towards her, and, leaning down, kissed her on the forehead.

"Oh, you darling," thought Stumpy. "How lovely of you, and how little I deserve such sweetness."

When she had recovered a little from her embarrassment her heart gave a great leap of joy, for she became aware that her neighbour had drawn nearer and that his elbow was touching hers. She returned the pressure, ever so lightly, and adjured herself:

"Never, never must he have an inkling of all that."

While the conversation went merrily on its way, Stumpy cautiously glanced up at him. His hand was resting on the arm of his chair, and she saw that he was wearing an engagement ring. Could it be? She was not alarmed, she was not even surprised; but she could not help feeling sad. Of course she had not expected anything better. Probably the lady was some lovely baroness or the other, heiress to a neighbouring estate. He himself belonged to the old territorial nobility, as she now knew. Fate decreed! Besides, was not she herself as good as engaged? A fine thing

too! She would not need to hang her head in deprecation before her friend. Indeed, Herr Gerberding earned her gratitude under the circumstances.

Her neighbour was dressed in a suit of blue cheviot, in spite of the fact that blue was no longer a fashionable colour. She knew that much from Herbert. As her eyes travelled down his person, slid over his hips and along the lines of his crossed legs, she became aware of something incredible, something almost horrible. Beneath the trouser rim she saw a pair of elastic-sided boots and the tops of thick, yellowy-grey woollen socks.

Woollen socks! Was he, then, one of those awful creatures Gudrun had nicknamed "creeping Jesuses," who wore woollen socks even in July and August, people who are nobodies and possess nothing except "honourable intentions," and who sneak the best years of a girl's life and in the end fail to come to the point? No, of course he wasn't!

Certainly this man next her had not sneaked anything from her or spoilt a minute of her life. She would have gladly given him eighty or a hundred years and recked little what the consequences might be. But it was a terrible pity he should wear such socks and such awful boots. Would not the others despise him? They were so elegantly dressed, with fine kid and patent leather footwear.

"I shall have to change all that," she resolved. "Some day I'll have to tell him. As his friend, it is my duty to do so. Yes, as his friend who intends to remain his friend so long as she lives."

The realisation of this latter fact filled her with quiet joy not wholly unmingled with sorrow.

Meanwhile, she found that the talk had gone cheerfully on its way regardless of whether she heeded it

or not. Her attention was now caught by the sound of his name.

"For instance, my people at Nadolny . . ." and Herr Samuel went on to describe the local love-customs of the peasants of his estate.

"Nadolny? My people at Nadolny?" What could her host mean? He was speaking of a place, but the man beside her had certainly been introduced as "Herr von Nadolny."

And then, all at once, everything became clear to her. That was the estate he had lost and for whose rescue he needed money, a fortune, as he had told her once long ago. And Herr Samuel or his father, it mattered little which, had been the purchaser.

How could her friend bear to come to this house? How could he sit drinking tea in Herr Samuel's company? How could he, poor as he now was, tolerate visiting a house of such ostentatious splendour, belonging to a man who could speak of the tenants on the Nadolny estate as "my people"? Why did not he, the rightful master of Nadolny, spring to his feet and walk out?

Anger and sorrow contended in her heart, until unexpectedly, Herr Samuel brought ease to her mind. He turned to Herr von Nadolny and said:

"If you are really in earnest as to the repurchase of your estate, I feel sure we shall be able to come to terms. Perhaps you'll be able to change some of these queer customs once you are back. I'm too often away, and have too many other irons in the fire, to worry much about what my people are doing. But of course your position is different. You are a member of the old family which exercised a patriarchal dominion over them, and you'll be able to resume the ancient relationship as soon as you are reinstated."

Then Stumpy's friend began to talk wisely and quietly about changing times, about the opening-out of fresh horizons since the war; he showed that any insistence upon old-time dominion could arouse antagonism, whereas everything was to be gained by suaver methods.

Stumpy listened eagerly, and thought: "His lovely voice! His lovely clarion voice!"

Again her eyes fell upon the engagement ring which circled his finger. Though at first this ring had caused her sadness, now it almost inspired her with horror, for did it not represent the price he would have to pay for the recovery of his heritage? Ransom! That's what it was.

A sob rose to her throat. She felt like falling upon his neck, and telling him all her sorrow and sympathy. Then she reproached herself, for such thoughts were akin to madness. What did it matter which particular baroness it was, or how beautiful? He had mentioned a baroness in the past. Perhaps it was that very one. Or, may be, it was another one even more lovely. And as these ideas raced through her mind, her sympathy was extinguished, and her desire to help was reduced to a sense of dull misery.

The tea-things had long since been cleared away, and the butler—a wonderful-looking person, like those dignitaries Stumpy had been so awed by at the "Adlon"—was handing round sherry. Delicate coils of cigarette smoke were rising on the air and catching the amber lights from vagrant sunbeams.

"How about taking a little air?" asked their host. "I'll order the car."

"Oh, but we've got plenty of fresh air coming in here," exclaimed Fräulein Dora, pointing to the glass doors which had been set wide, thus revealing the

luxuriant beauty of the garden, with its white statues gleaming against a background of dark firs, and its pergola entwined with roses.

"If only I could wander about there with him," thought Stumpy. "No greater joy could be imagined."

All the others begged to be allowed to remain where they were, and Stumpy found pluck enough to join her plea to theirs.

"Then I'll just go and give some orders," said Herr Samuel, "so that we may not die of hunger."

He got up and disappeared into an inner sanctum, while his guests strolled out on to the terrace whence a flight of steps led down into the garden.

Stumpy's pulses were throbbing, for now, at last, the moment had come when he and she would be alone.

But just as they were preparing to make off, Gudrun came up, saying:

"I can't help feeling, Herr Nadolny, that we have met before."

"Oh, dear," thought Stumpy, seized with renewed terror, "suppose it all comes out, and she learns how I played her false. What shall I do? What will happen? Will he remember?"

No! He looked at Gudrun, and said calmly:

"Where could that have been, I should like to know?"

"That's just what I want to know! Your face could not be so familiar to me if I had not met you before. It may have been some time ago, but I'm sure we have met before to-day."

"One sees a person casually in this place or in that," he answered unconcernedly; "in the street-car, at college, who knows where else besides! I know such a lot of faces it would be impossible to put a name to,

for their owners are in reality complete strangers to me."

"I fancy there must be more to it than that," insisted Gudrun. "You think it over, and I'll do the same, and I'm sure we'll remember in the end."

At that moment, their host, returning from his housewifely duties, slipped his hand under her arm, and led her away into the garden.

They were alone at last!

What was going to happen? Oh, what was going to happen?

An eternity of silence. Then, very softly, he asked:

"How have you been all this long time?"

"And you?"

Stumpy spoke as softly as he, and kept her eyes glued to the ground.

"Stumpy!"

The word sounded like a caress, like a vow of unshakable fidelity.

And yet, there was the tell-tale ring upon his finger!

"So you have not forgotten that funny little name?"

This time she ventured to look up into his face.

"I remember everything, every word, and every . . ."

He broke off, but she knew very well what was in his mind. Then he said:

"I'm rather sorry, all the same, that we've met once more."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." and he pointed to the ring on his finger.

This was the moment of triumph.

"So far as that goes, I, too, am as good as engaged."

"Ah? And you're not seventeen yet." His eyes, as he spoke, were sad, and nevertheless had a twinkle in them as if he were condoning some childish prank.

"Yes," she boasted, "he's very rich, he's staying at the 'Adlon,' has two cars—you can ask my sister, if you don't believe me—so Papa and Mamma think, and I quite agree with them, that I should not let such a chance slip through my fingers. He's gone off west just now, on business—he's the centre of huge business enterprises. As soon as he returns we're going to have the engagement announced. He's going back to Argentina in the autumn, and I'm sailing with him. Are you coming to the wedding, Herr von Nadolny?"

"Stumpy!"

That was all he said, but the single word held so much sorrow and reproach that she was hard put to it not to fling her arms round his neck and beg him to forgive her.

Then she looked down at his hand, saw the betrothal ring on his finger, and again her heart hardened.

"And what about yourself?" she asked. "Are you, too, making a good match?"

She had no idea how Herbert's favourite expression had come so glibly to her lips. It sounded like a term of abuse, now she had uttered it. Still, it was the right word in the right place under the circumstances, she reflected.

"I'd rather you did not ask me about that," he said quietly. "At least, not to-day, if you don't mind. It's a shame to mar the pleasure of this meeting by such talk. I'll tell you all about it some other time."

"Some other time," she mentally rehearsed. "He said 'some other time.' That means he intends us to see one another again. Then it does not matter about

the plain gold betrothal ring—it's of no more account than if it had a diamond of the purest water set in the middle of it!"

Her jubilant thoughts were brought back to earth by the sound of his voice, saying:

"Queer thing about your sister. I remember her very well. It was she I had a date with that day in the Savignyplatz when you and I first met. I hardly think that you could have been there quite by chance. So I thought it best to put her off till you and I had had a talk. Please tell me all about it."

Stumpy was rueful. Suppose he should think her an adept in deception, or a snatcher up of other girls' boy friends, or something horrible like that? Oh, then she would have forfeited his respect for ever!

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind." Then, after a pause, she resumed: "No, that's not fair either, so I may as well make full confession. You'll have to decide whether it was awfully wicked of me or not."

So she told him the whole adventure from start to finish: how Gudrun had sent her with the message, how she, Stumpy, had lacked courage to give it, or, indeed, to speak to him at all, but that when he had spoken, she . . . and so on, to the end.

When she had done, she stood still, awaiting his verdict. But he said nothing. Instead, he did what she could never have hoped he would do: he laid an arm around her shoulders, and drew her towards him, very gently, very tenderly—a caressive hug, no more. And her heart brimmed with gratitude and love.

Thus they walked in silence for a while in the dusk, along the garden paths and beneath the darkling trees. It was not until they heard a footfall coming towards them that they drew apart and began to talk of ordinary things.

It was Dr. Lavallo and Fräulein Dora who approached. They seemed to have ceased their endless argumentations, for they were strolling along now arm in arm, very peacefully, talking softly and intimately together.

Gudrun and Herr Samuel remained invisible. Presumably they had chosen a more secluded corner to converse in.

A gong broke in upon the idyllic peace, threateningly, as if it were the trumpet summoning mankind to the last judgment.

They went in to supper.

The table was laid in another room than those Stumpy had seen before. It was panelled in dark oak, above which the walls were clothed with stamped leather, framed in gold, reaching to the vaulted ceiling. There were festoons of shaded lamps all round, and a handsome chandelier hung low over the table, but it had not been lighted. Only its great bronze scrolls gleamed faintly, spreading wide arms as if to invoke a blessing on the repast.

To Stumpy, the way the table was laid seemed nothing less than a wondrous miracle.

A basket of flowers formed the centrepiece. The vases and decanters shone like silver. The places were laid with gaily painted porcelain, and a veritable regiment of crystal glasses of various sizes flanked them to the right. The table napkins were contrived into the most marvellous spirals. It looked even lovelier than at the "Adlon," lovelier by far than anything Herr Gerberding had provided.

Herr Gerberding! He seemed to Stumpy to cut a very poor figure in face of all this magnificence.

The guests had assembled. Their host cast a final glance over the arrangements. Gudrun's cheeks were

very red. Stumpy knew that hers, too, were flaming, she had seen as much in her pocket mirror. But then that was natural to her when she was excited, whereas Gudrun . . .

The meal started off with champagne, champagne in silver goblets, and one never could tell how much one had drunk and how much there remained still to drink. The butler was constantly filling the glasses, again and again.

Conversation was now less learned than it had been over the tea-cups. Gudrun joked with all the men, while Fräulein Dora's merriment was contagious. She never seemed to stop laughing. Such pleasant, innocent laughter, it made Stumpy feel quite wicked, and at the same time aroused her maternal instincts.

"I do hope she won't drink too much," thought Stumpy, wondering how she might convey a word of warning. "I'll give her a gentle kick under the table," she decided at last. But when she tried to put her resolve into execution she found that her leg was far too short. Indeed, her foot only reached as far as Fritz's—and once having got there, it remained at rest.

Yes, that was her friend's name. Fritz! He had told her so while they paced the garden together. He had also given her the history of his family, describing father, mother, brothers and sisters. It was just as she had guessed. During the inflation period his estates had fallen into the hands of Herr Samuel senior. And Herr von Nadolny senior could thank his stars that he had been able to find a job as land steward on a stranger's estate. One of Fritz's sisters had become the unpaid secretary of another landowner, while the other was overseer on a poultry farm. The youngest brother had inaugurated a riding

school in the neighbouring town. Unfortunately, pupils were few and far between. Aristocratic penury! That was the picture unfolded before Stumpy's eyes, and her heart had swelled with sorrow and pity.

She was no longer vexed with him on account of the engagement ring he wore on his finger. She no longer grieved at the plain gold band. It could be as plain as it liked or set with a diamond for all she cared. Fate itself had spoken, of that she was now convinced.

He had also told her about himself. How by a remunerative sale of some property, he had found the means to pay for his college training and thereby to become competent to accept a highly responsible job as steward of a big estate, a job which made great demands on his capacities, and was no less exacting than would have been the management of a great industrial undertaking. By the time winter had come his capacity would have been fully tested, and he naturally hoped he would come out of it with colours flying. Then—then . . .

He had got no further. Nor was he more communicative as to the repurchase of his family estates. She guessed that this was intimately linked with the betrothal ring on his finger, and had not pressed the matter.

Thank goodness, however, he had said he would tell her more by and by!

The meal came to an end, and Stumpy was relieved, for the jokes which were shuttlecocked between Gudrun and the other two men were becoming broader and broader. Fritz laughed as well, but he glanced concernedly her way from time to time. Fräulein Dora continued to look amazingly happy, and sometimes she laughed so unrestrainedly and with so childlike an inno-

cence that Stumpy was led to the conclusion that she had not understood half of what was said.

Cheese and celery had been served and cleared away, and now their host got to his feet and said:

"Before we leave the dinner-table, I want each pair to 'drink brotherhood' after the ancient custom of the Germans. I don't require it of all to drink with all. But the couples who belong together to-day must not go away without a token to take with them into the future."

So saying, he put his arm round Gudrun, and kissed her on the lips.

Dr. Lavalley was about to follow suit with his companion, but as his lips neared hers Fräulein Dora gently fended him off, saying:

"I'm afraid you'll all think me a bit of a ninny, but I have never been kissed in my life. It seems to me that a kiss is something sacred and one has no right to bring contumely upon it even in fun."

But she did not refuse to drain her glass to her friend's good health. They clinked glasses and laughed merrily, but did not seal the pact in the customary way.

"Now it's your turn," said their host encouragingly, turning to where Stumpy and Nadolny sat.

She looked at Fritz, and Fritz looked at her. A question flew from one pair of eyes to the other: "Shall we be forced to reveal the bond that exists between us?" And promptly the answer flashed back: "We shall be revealing nothing. On the contrary, if we don't make any fuss but just do what we are asked, we shall be placing thicker veils over our secret."

They kissed. It was a quick kiss, light as gossamer. True, it was exchanged simply to gratify their host's whim; and yet it was thrilling, and made them feel

happy—for did it not bring them back to the familiar footing they had enjoyed in days gone by?

What next happened, passed as in a dream, fragrant with linden blossoms and as sweet as a blackbird's song, while the heavens were suffused with the rosy tints of the warm summer night.

Coffee was served under the stars, on the terrace. They quaffed sherbet, and sipped a wonderful punch of which peaches were one of the most notable ingredients. They lolled in comfortable wicker armchairs, smoking and chatting.

Then the three couples wandered off in different directions, and were soon swallowed up in the gloom of the trees.

Fritz found a bench, so remote that he felt sure no one else would intrude upon their privacy.

Stumpy lay enfolded in his arms, and gazed up into his dear face, which looked very solemn as it peered down at her in the darkness.

She lifted her mouth to his from time to time, but he did not kiss her, though his eyes were dreamy and full of longing. So much she could detect, for the night was not as dark as it had been that time when they sat together in the Tiergarten.

After a long, long silence, he began to speak:

"Darling, this has come upon me so suddenly, that I can hardly grasp what it all means. The gods alone know what is going to happen to us. I don't believe that either of us could bear a complete severance. And yet how can we venture to see much of each other either? What are we to do, you and I? We are both committed elsewhere, and for life. I've got to keep myself in hand, got to let reason be my guide, to-day and for always. If I do not, I shall bring endless misery upon you, my sweet."

"Nonsense! Even if we can only meet at rare intervals, that will be happiness and to spare."

"Not for us even such rare intervals, my dear. You are bound for a far-off land, while I . . ."

He was silent. A shudder ran through his whole body.

She comforted him as best she could.

"I'll be here three months longer, for my parents have refused to let me be married before I'm seventeen. And you are not settled yet either. We've got a quarter of a year to be happy in," she coaxed. "Don't say no, please, please, oh, please!"

Fritz shook his head sadly.

"Parting would only be made more difficult. Two meetings, no more! And yet, I know how I've been longing for you all the time, all this long, long time, since we parted."

Stumpy was overwhelmed with shame and remorse. No matter how sure she had been that she cared for him, she certainly had not thought about him much or longed to see him; if she had, things might have gone otherwise with her. . . .

"Listen to me, sweetheart. We will not see each other again for three days. I'll think matters over meanwhile, and come to a decision. Then we shall meet at six . . ."

"At half-past," she interrupted. "I don't think I can get away from my work earlier."

Horror seemed to grip at her heartstrings, as the thought of the dentist flashed through her mind. She caught her breath. Then she heard Fritz saying:

"Very well, let it be six-thirty. Same place as before. Then I'll tell you the whole story of my life. You'll have to decide for us both, when you've heard everything."

"What is there for me to decide? I only want what you want."

He pressed her close, and then, abruptly, rose to his feet.

"Come, Stumpy, let's be getting along. Perhaps we'll run across the others."

Stumpy did not allow her disappointment to betray her, for in her innermost heart she realised how delicate was his respect for her and how well he meant by her.

As they sauntered along the alley-way arm in arm, they caught the shimmer of a woman in a white frock, lying in a man's arms. It was beautiful young Dora, the girl who had never been kissed before. Her pale face was turned towards the sky, in blissful unconsciousness of the world and of the approaching footsteps. Her great eyes stared upwards towards that heaven which showers its blessings upon the earth below.

This vision was an immense consolation to Stumpy, who thought: "If she, who is so much purer and better than I, can bow before the grandeur of love in defiance of her better reason and her will, how can I, poor, weak, loving little Stumpy, hope to escape?"

She felt she had expiated all her sins and been forgiven, that she was absolved from the guilt of everything that had happened and was going to happen. So overpowering was the sensation that, at the next turn in the path, she said hastily to her companion:

"Excuse me for a moment. Please wait for me here."

She ran back to where Dora lay, and, bending low, kissed the hand that rested on the arm of the bench.

Dora roused herself with a little cry of alarm, but before she could turn round, Stumpy had vanished.

Chapter Thirteen

STUMPY KNITS A PAIR OF SILK SOCKS AND FINDS A VOCATION

THREE days! What a long time they take to run their course! And if you are so foolish as to imagine they will fly quickly by, you will soon discover that eternity is as nothing to them.

In addition to the breathless state of suspense, a hundred and one other worries come to add to your troubles.

First of all there was Gudrun:

"I wish I could recollect where I have met your Herr von Nadolny before. He can deny having met me as much as he pleases, but I know that somewhere and somewhen we have actually spoken to one another. I could swear to that in a court of law if necessary. He has an unforgettable voice."

Stumpy thought:

"It would certainly be an amazing feat to forget that clarion ring in his voice." And at the thought her pulses throbbed, and her throat went dry.

"He's not very well groomed," continued Gudrun censoriously. "I'd always pictured our landed gentry as being smarter looking than that. And fancy his dressing in blue! No one, except sailors, ever wears blue nowadays."

Stumpy prayed that the woollen socks might have escaped her sister's notice. Yes, thank goodness, she had apparently not seen them!

But something must be done about the matter.

Fritz must not be exposed to mockery and derision; no, never again. The simplest plan would be to say quite frankly: "This, that and the other is not worn." But she knew that such bluntness was not for her. No less out of the question was it for her to buy him a pair of silk socks as a gift. It might wound him.

Then she had a splendid idea: she would knit him a pair of socks! They'd come as a love-token, like a nice soft cushion or a crocheted necktie, and he could not refuse to accept them.

"Darling Mamma, I do so want to learn some housewifely job. Think how pleased Herr Gerberding would be! Couldn't you show me how to knit a pair of socks?"

Mamma looked her astonishment.

"But, my dear child, no one knits socks nowadays. It's gone out of fashion ages ago. Bought ones are ever so much more comfortable."

"Still, they may not have got so far as machine-made socks in South America. There are a lot of savages to be found in Argentina. Anyway, I'd love you to show me."

Poor Mamma! This was a most unlooked for trial, for she had not knitted since her girlhood.

All the same, when she saw the wine-coloured silk Stumpy had bought to match the blue suit, Mamma's ambition rose to the occasion. She took up the needles Stumpy had provided, and the first lesson was soon in full swing.

"First of all, you must cast on your stitches. So. That takes four needles. Then with the fifth, you join up one and two, like this . . ."

"Let me see you 'join up' again," said Stumpy.

"It's always so difficult to explain," said Mamma; "but you do it like this."

Very difficult it proved for Mamma to bring the process back to memory. In the end, however, she succeeded, and one whole round was knitted.

"There," cried Mamma. "Now you go on knitting one plain and one purl to form a nice elastic border."

"But how shall I ever remember which is plain and which purl?"

"Just look closely while I do it," counselled Mamma, proud of her feat of memory. "I simply can't tell you in words."

It was certainly difficult. Very difficult. But one overcomes all obstacles for the sake of the person one loves. When bedtime arrived, Stumpy declared her intention of staying up a couple of hours longer so as to get on with her self-imposed task. She vowed she needed that in order to impress the newly acquired art on her memory.

Mamma was delighted.

"By the time Herr Gerberding comes back you will perhaps have finished the pair, and be able to give him a nice present," she said. "That will show him how fond you are of him."

"Yes, yes," thought Stumpy. "But Herr Gerberding can wait. He'll never be more than a second string to my bow!"

What a martyrdom it was to keep up a correspondence with the man! Twice a week, with the utmost regularity, his letters arrived. They were written on blue paper, with a business heading, telegraphic address, bankers, and all. Herr Gerberding expected to receive a reply from Stumpy with equal regularity. Hitherto she had managed fairly well, and when her own inspiration had been exhausted she had applied to Mamma or to Gudrun for suggestions.

But now! Her mind of a sudden had become a complete blank. She did not even know how to begin.

"Be a brick, Gudrun. You've so often helped me over my stiles. Give a hand now. I simply can't think of a word to say."

"Look here," answered Gudrun kindly, "I'll dictate the whole bally thing to you."

"Oh, you darling," cried Stumpy delightedly.

So Gudrun began:

"Dear, dear Herr Gerberding . . ."

"I've only written one 'dear' hitherto," objected Stumpy.

"That's a reason for writing it twice to-day! When a girl finds she loves another man and does not want to jilt the first yet awhile, she's got to be double as nice—otherwise he's likely to smell a rat."

"What 'other' man?" asked Stumpy, feigning obtuseness.

"No use trying to kid me," answered Gudrun. "The other evening brought both of us something lovely into our lives. I hardly think mine will come to much; though he's rather a dear, all the same. Do you know he bathes in Russian eau de Cologne and he rides nothing but thoroughbreds. But he's so used to having stacks of money that he'll never be able to imagine his lady love not wanting to possess her own house and car and sable coat. Perhaps he can impress chorus girls and such like with his lavish ways, that sort of thing cuts no ice with me. Besides, he expects me to be faithful to him alone. Can't be done, my dear!"

Stumpy sighed and thought: "I'd like to be faithful to my Fritz." Then a shudder went through her as she remembered Dr. Shadow.

She was at her third already, and this time the thing was really serious. How much heartache was in store

for her! How many desperate resolves would be made because of fear and compunction!

If only she had not done this! If only she were not going to do that! Incalculable happiness might have been hers. Now she must forgo it for ever.

In one of the drawers of Mamma's cupboard, amid a mass of ribbons and laces, lay a forgotten hatpin. It was one of those murderous weapons the police had had to forbid in the days before the pull-on hat.

Stumpy remembered having seen it, and on the morning which followed that red-letter day she had ferreted it out and had put it in her attaché case before going off to work.

She intended to use it on Dr. Shadow, should he again molest her.

"It's either him or me," she said to herself. Either she would stick the hatpin into his heart, or, if her strength failed her, then she'd . . . She had not forgotten the story of Virginius and his daughter Virginia which she had read in school. She fully recognised that she was not an innocent maiden like Virginia, but at least she could die. Then He would come in the dusk of the evening hour, and weep upon her grave. The thought of such a love-pilgrimage on Fritz's part seemed to her so exquisite that her own eyes filled with tears.

Thank goodness, everything happened quite otherwise.

Since she had repulsed him, Dr. Shadow had not tried to renew his love-making; nor did he change his tactics to-day. Had he not more than enough lady friends to satisfy him? When he cast sheep's eyes at his patients, and invited them into the X-ray room, Stumpy heaved a sigh of relief. But she was still

uneasy. She was all of a tremble until the first patient arrived and after the last patient had gone, sensing the danger that might overtake her.

The three days slowly dragged along their weary course, while Stumpy's heart fluttered between hope and distress. She applied herself assiduously to her knitting, and, though a few stitches were dropped, these flaws could be remedied with a darning-needle at a later stage! The wine-coloured silk sock had reached the heel-turning stage by the time the period of waiting was over.

How proud she was, and how happy, at the thought of all this toil on his behalf!

And now, at last, the hour of meeting had come.

Very different to-day from what it had been at their first encounter! Many hours yet before the sun would go down! It was still shining merrily into the Savigny-platz when she got there. Well, what did it matter how bright the daylight was? She had no need to hide. Herr Gerberding was away in the west country, hunting after options. Dr. Shadow could do her no harm. She and Fritz might have lain clasped in one another's arms, like all true lovers, with absolute impunity, were it not for that wretched engagement ring on his finger!

Still, it was for him to decide how far they could go in their love-making. He'd know about such things better than she.

There he was! Dear God, he was striding across the square towards her! The same blue suit—and how well he looked in it to be sure, even though it was quite out of fashion! A stiff-brimmed hat of hard, yellow straw—well that, at least, happened to be what smartly dressed men were wearing this summer. Anyway it was better than the weather-worn cap he usually

affected. She could not catch a glimpse of his socks. . . .

And she might call him "Fritz" when she said how d'ye do to him. Yes, plain "Fritz," as if she had known him from the beginning of time.

He carried three roses in his left hand, just as he had on the first occasion. These he offered her with a loving smile, saying:

"As a souvenir."

"Of course I ought to be jealous of Gudrun, in retrospect," she said, thanking him with her eyes. "She has every right to be jealous of me, and I shouldn't be surprised if in her secret heart she were. She is always asking: 'Where can I have met him before?' I do hope and pray she will never find out!"

"I can't help feeling a bit ashamed of myself," he said, "for having so lightheartedly given her the slip!"

"Don't you worry about Gudrun. I know her! She won't have cared a snap of the fingers. She leads her boy friends a fine dance, I can tell you!"

"But you are not like that, are you?" he questioned coaxingly, while he stroked the little hand that still lay in his.

"Oh, my dear, if I am ever spoken to by a man I don't know, I feel like dying from nervousness."

He appeared to be satisfied, and they started on their way to the Tiergarten.

"I wonder if we shall find our bench again?"

"That won't be difficult," he answered. "I've gone to sit there heaps of times, thinking about you."

She thrilled at the words, and yet, at the same time she was a little ashamed of herself for not seeming to have loved him quite so much as he her. It had never entered her head to seek out the bench and let her thoughts dwell on him.

But she would make up for her past neglect! Oh, yes, a thousand times over!

When they reached the bench, she realised that she would never have been able to find it alone. Both times they had sat there before, the night had been as dark as pitch. Besides, he had been her guide on each occasion, and she had never been concerned as to where he led her.

They sat as close together as turtle-doves in a nest. But there were a good many passers-by, and this deprived them of the sense of privacy and peace.

"Don't let us take any notice of them," urged Fritz. She tried her best to ignore them, but she felt self-conscious and uneasy.

"Now you just tell me everything that's happened to you all these months," he said. "As a matter of fact, I'd love to hear the whole story of your life, about which I know precious little, come to think of it."

No need for lies now. She told him quite simply of her childhood and the war-time years, of her father and mother, of her school days, of Herbert, of Gudrun. In mentioning her sister and her half-brother she had, of course, to use discretion. Fritz must on no account think badly of them—or of her, for that matter.

But when it came to telling him about this last year—oh, well, truth and honesty had to go by the board. Dr. Shadow was made to appear a fine, honourable gentleman, paternal in his behaviour towards her; and Herr Gerberding, with his conqueror's nature, was portrayed in the most glowing colours. It would seem, indeed, that the latter was the owner of half the world!

Not until she saw that Fritz was beginning to look glum did she try to strike a less enthusiastic note, saying:

"Still, you know, I don't really care a scrap for all this. You are the only man I love, only you; and, since I've got you again, Herr Gerberding and his millions can just go hang."

"No, no," he expostulated, looking Stumpy square in the eyes. "You must not say that. I've broken in on your life to disturb its even flow. The best thing I can do is to disappear from the picture again. I haven't anything in this world to offer you. I'm bound in decency to be loyal to my fiancée. Even if I could bring myself to break the vows I have made to her, and to marry you, I'd never forgive myself for having spoiled your fine match to make of you nothing better than the wife of a land-steward. No, I simply could not do that; I love you too much. If I were really a decent and honest man, I'd say good-bye to you here and now, and never try to see you again."

"Oh, please don't say that!"

"No, no, of course not. I could not do so now even if I would! Perhaps it's rather weak of me—but I just can't. I have thought about it all these days, my thoughts going round and round like a squirrel in its cage, how to make the best use possible of the three months that remain to us, how I can best enjoy your company and make the most of these few weeks before you sail."

"Yes, yes! And how I am to see you often and often," she cried eagerly, and was about to seize his hand, when someone passed by with such a look of scorn at this love-making that she had not the courage to put her gesture into execution, but quickly withdrew into herself. "As a matter of fact," she continued after a pause, "we've got four months. My birthday isn't till November, and they'll probably choose that day for the wedding. Till then, I'm free. That is to

say, if Herr Gerberding does not get back before. Once he is here, I shall be expected to go about with him. Besides, until the official announcement I shall have to go on working at Dr. Shadow's. That's my one sure means of an independent livelihood. Still I shall always be able to arrange for a meeting, even if it's only twice a week. I shall think of those meetings all my life."

"Same here," he said. "But how are we going to fix the thing up? That's what is worrying me. We can't mooch around in the Tiergarten every time . . ."

"Of course not!"

Stumpy had raised her voice, thereby attracting the notice of an individual who turned in his walk and stared at this couple of love-birds on the bench. She flashed her eyes indignantly at the intruder, who, having satisfied his curiosity, was now continuing on his way.

"Not much better if we go to a restaurant," Fritz went on. "And we haven't time to get away into the country," he sighed and glanced at his watch. "I'm so often engaged in the evening. The best would be for you to come to my rooms."

"Splendid! Do you think I really may?"

"Don't misunderstand me. I should not dare to make such a proposal if I were not quite sure of myself, and, above all, of you. You are so modest and innocent—there can't be any one in the whole world more modest and innocent than you."

Poor Stumpy! She bit her under-lip nearly in twain, so horrified and frightened did she feel at his words.

"That's just why I love you so," he pursued. "And, remembering it, I shan't find it very difficult to respect you! I'm not even going to kiss you, I swear it. You'll be my dear little sister. You'll be like an angel

in my house, something absolutely sacred, something that will bring a ray of sunshine into my life. You'll be able to make free with all I possess, the undisputed mistress of everything beneath my roof."

"Haven't you got a landlady in the place?"

"No, thank goodness. The rooms are furnished with my own stuff. When our estates were sold, all the things in the old home were divided among us children. I took along what I thought might be useful to me. Nothing but a lot of old clutter, but I am fond of it, and would not exchange it for Herr Samuel's magnificence. And by the time you have been there and used them, they'll be three times as precious."

She did not speak, for she realised that any word she could say might lead him to change his mind.

Oh, if only it were not for that ring, that idiotic, horrible ring! Still, reproach would ill become her, since there was always Herr Gerberding in the offing. Well, well, one must be content to let things be. Fate demanded sacrifices of us all.

Fritz was not slow to perceive whither her glance had travelled. He, too, looked down at his finger, and said:

"Now I'd better tell you about the thing which at present bulks so large in my life.—But, not to-day. I'm sorry, but I really can't. You must forgive me. You see, if I started telling you all that, I'd perhaps be building a wall between us. . . ."

"Honestly, I don't particularly want to know," she interrupted. As she spoke she really believed what she said, though as a rule lack of the inquisitive faculty was not her foible.

"Once you are in my digs we'll have heaps of time for confidences. It's so quiet and peaceful there, you'll be able to understand and forgive ever so much better."

Stumpy reflected: "What on earth have I to forgive him? It's the other way about, really!" But how lovely it was to look forward to the peace and quiet he promised!

They agreed, therefore, to meet in his rooms two days hence for he had an engagement on the morrow. She would come straight from Dr. Shadow's.

He lived in Leibnizstrasse, not far from the dentist's. That was very convenient. At any time, when she had a moment to spare, she could slip round and see if he were at home. Even if Herr Gerberding came back . . .

What happiness to look forward to! One long series of delightful hours together! Why worry about anything? Nothing mattered.

Fritz got up.

"I must be off," he said.

Stumpy knew that even when they were apart his every thought would be for her until they should meet again and once more should be alone together.

She walked with him as far as the crossroads; there he jumped on to a street car and was gone. Only his hat could be seen, waving to her through the dusk.

At home, the hour for the evening meal had long since gone by. No use returning yet. She'd take a further stroll in the park, where at every turn she caught glimpses of loving couples in tranced embraces. Back to "our" bench, there to be lost in blissful dreams.

Joyful vistas opened before her, filled with tasks she loved. She was to be his comrade, his guardian angel, the dispenser of peace and joy, desiring nothing for herself. Like a disembodied spirit she would hover around him, showering benedictions upon him. No earthly longing should come to disturb the beatitude of her soul; not even a kiss was to be sanctioned between

them. Released from suffering and passion, she would be like a guest sent from heaven to bless his life for a little while, and then, if so it must be, to vanish again as if she had never existed.

Dreams within dreams, as the evening hours went by. All next day, too, she lived in this world of bliss. Doctor, patients, X-ray room, simply did not exist for her. Nothing existed so far as she was concerned. The only real things were her dreams.

Her day at the dentist's ended, she went to a beauty parlour and had her hair shampooed and water-waved in preparation for the morrow. As she was on her homeward way she caught sight of a lovely set of undies in pale blue milanese trimmed with lemon-coloured lace and with satin-ribbon shoulder straps. Milanese was not as expensive as crêpe de chine, and was quite as soft and silky, so Stumpy went in and bought the set. A bargain, too! Gudrun would be surprised at the price.

Stumpy was happy with her purchase. . . . Besides—you never could tell!

Chapter Fourteen

STUMPY ENTERS UPON HER HOUSEWIFELY DUTIES

THREE storeys up; four storeys; five! Yes, five good flights of stairs to climb, no exaggeration.

At last Stumpy came to a door in the attic flat, on which was pinned a visiting card:

FRITZ VON NADOLNY
Land-Steward

Stumpy pressed the electric button. She was full of self-confidence to-day, and, when she heard the bell tinkle in response, she was surprised to find herself quite free from agitation. This was her home. This was where she naturally belonged.

Steps were approaching.

Then he was standing in the doorway pressing her eager little hands in his.

They went down a long passage to another door leading into a room which obviously served as kitchen, for against one of the walls Stumpy spied a gas cooking-stove, and a rack with saucepans. Through a curtain she could see a second room with a bath, a fixed basin, etc.

In the little entry there was yet another door.

This led into the sitting-room, a cheery place, containing a gate-leg table laden with books, a sofa with golden claws at the end of the arms and a travelling rug flung across the back as if to hide deficiencies—for the damask silk covering was sadly the worse for

wear. Two cupboards, filled a whole side of the room: one was arched, and inlaid with gaily-coloured flowers; the other had two alabaster columns between which was a mirror, so dimmed with age that it no longer served its purpose.

To the left was a door, and next to this a long low window—three of the windows in her parent's house would hardly have been as big. The roof slanted down towards this window, forming one side of the gable. Here, attached to the ceiling were cases containing samples of wheat, halm and ear intact, turning to a rich gold.

There was also a cumbrous writing-table, with heavily carved legs. It was strewn with a number of wooden cups containing a blackish earth, and there were pens and pencils in a tray, with an inkstand and a portfolio.

The floor was piled with books.

Stumpy had never seen a room like this, and her surprise took all power of speech from her. She could only stand stock-still in the middle, and stare.

"But you haven't seen all," said Fritz, leading the way through a narrow passage into an unexpectedly large bedroom—at least, Stumpy thought it must be his bedroom because there was a camp bedstead in one corner. But the place looked to her much more like an alchemist's laboratory—a workshop devoted to the search for the philosopher's stone. On three tables she saw spirit lamps and retorts and test-tubes. In pots and wooden receptacles there were further samples of earth and sand. Plain boards fixed to the walls served as shelves; on one of them, a machine with many wheels and cranks; on another, a similar machine at work, whirring and humming, and dropping little drops of water into an earthenware jug.

The chairs and the bed were covered with clothes, flung carelessly down—indeed, in this respect, the room looked very like Herbert's in the morning before Lina, the maid, had gone to tidy it up.

Stumpy began to feel more than ever at home!

"Need of a woman's hand here," she said, laughing.

"A charwoman comes to do for me every morning. She makes my bed and brews my coffee. But I dare not let her indulge in much tidying for fear she should spoil my experiments."

Stumpy was radiant.

"You'll have to show me how all these things work. You'll have to teach me about them. Then I can move among them freely without risk—and put your things away, and generally speaking, tidy you up a bit."

"Would you really care to?"

"Rather! What's the use of my coming, otherwise?"

Stumpy's pride knew no bounds. She slipped off her coat, and looked round for a hanger. There was none. Perhaps in the cupboards? . . . On opening one of their doors, she found all the shelves cluttered with painted cups and saucers, crystal flasks, oxidised silver urns, goblets, reliquaries of exquisite workmanship, but encrusted with the dirt of many years' neglect.

"I shall have to clean and polish these things," said Stumpy, in housewifely concern.

"They don't need polishing."

"What do you mean? They're quite black with dirt."

"That's part of their value! They are ancient heirlooms. May come in handy some day when I'm more than usually short of cash."

"Do you mean to say they are real silver?" It had never entered her head that the owner of such wonderful treasures could yet be a poor man.

"You don't suppose I'd keep them if they weren't?"

"But why have you allowed them to get so black?"

"They are very, very old, and have become oxidised. That adds enormously to their value."

Stumpy did not know what to say, but she looked up at her friend with awed and respectful eyes. Her next thought was that she must now vindicate her right to be here by making herself useful.

"I'll get supper ready," she said.

"You'll find a loaf and some butter in the cupboard, and we'll have a slice or two of the ham Mother's sent me."

So he had a mother!

"Have you her photo?"

He led her to the cupboard with the alabaster columns. Tucked into the framework of the extinct mirror were about half a dozen pictures which Stumpy had overlooked in her preliminary investigation. Fritz pointed to one of the photographs.

A delicate, rather weary-looking face framed in soft greyish hair, and two beautiful, dark eyes, gentle and sad, was what Stumpy saw.

"How lovely to be able to call this woman, Mother," thought Stumpy.

There were portraits of two girls with the same kind of eyes, only they were twinkling and full of joy; and an elderly man with aquiline features and a great length of moustache such as Stumpy had never seen before, at any rate in Berlin. Why, the tips of this wonderful moustache reached its owner's shoulders!

And here was the picture of yet another lady.

Stumpy caught her breath as she looked, and felt a pang at her heart, but whether from jealousy or from fear she would have found it hard to tell.

This lady had pale gold hair, and narrow, domineering lips; hair Eton-cropped; a shortish nose, finely chiselled and with sensitive nostrils. And the eyes! They were large, limpid eyes, defiant in expression. Were they cold? Were they empty? Anyway they were eyes that made you feel like creeping away and hiding yourself, Stumpy thought.

"Is it she?"

"Yes," said Fritz, through his clenched teeth.

"I could not live with her," murmured Stumpy consolately.

"Nor can I," he answered. "But I've just got to!"

He took her hand in his, and led her to the sofa.

"Come, lie back in my arms," said he. "Don't look at me. I'll try and tell you the whole story."

But Stumpy's heart was still sore.

"My Herr Gerberding is not exactly the person to make a girl happy. Still, it seems to me I'm not so badly off with him as you'll be with her."

"Before I met you again, I fancied I had resigned myself to my fate. No use trying to fight against what was to be. But now I feel as if I had sold myself into slavery—and for a man who loves his freedom and who has a proper pride, a thing like that hurts; it hurts horribly."

Stumpy snuggled up against his shoulder, and would have given much to possess the courage to raise her hand to stroke his cheek.

"I was still at school when the war began," Fritz resumed. "Then came my period of training, and I was in active service during the last two years of the affair. In spite of hunger and dirt, I should not

have minded fighting on to the bitter end. We had become so dehumanised by that time, that the horrors of war held nothing more of horror for us. The real horrors began when peace came! I was spoiled for any life outside that of the trenches. Still, the family estates remained, and to these I clung as to an anchor of safety. Then everything seemed to go to pot. The place was sold. The money the sale brought in vanished. There was nothing left. When it came to finding a job, I discovered there were dozens of men like myself, with the rank of lieutenant, with the iron cross and other first-class orders—and not the price of a bite of bread in their pockets. All the same I pulled through somehow, I learned this, that, and the other—and then came the stroke of good luck I've already told you about. That made it possible for me to go to college and work for my degree. But my family has been a constant burden on my shoulders. Besides they are all utterly wretched, poor dears, and so I've been thinking more and more that I must try and buy back our estates. I had no time to think of love. That affair with your sister was pure accident. about six months after we met I saw an ad. in the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*. It read: 'Advertiser wishes to buy a landed estate at present owned by man of family. No applications from professional intermediaries entertained.' Of course, I had no such land to sell, but previous experience in this field had shown me what was the probable meaning of the advertisement, and I felt sure that I had only to put out feelers . . . In a word, I called at the address given, and that is how I got to know her. She lives in a high-class boarding house, and idles away her time, waiting upon destiny. Her object soon became plain enough, for when I had found one or two likely sellers and went with her

to see their estates, she showed herself more interested in our journeys together and in the chance of getting better acquainted with me than in the business on which we were nominally engaged. Well, that's how it all came about. I'd rather not tell you the details. We're engaged—that's all. As soon as I have passed my exam (I've insisted on that) we're to be married. Of course, as far as my side of the understanding is concerned, I am thinking especially of my lost home, where Herr Samuel junior is now installed as owner. But he is asking such a long price that I should be cheating my betrothed if I advised her to pay so much on my account. Meanwhile, we're an engaged couple, and my great difficulty is how to scrape up funds for our evenings together. Of course I can't let her pay her own expenses, and still less mine. She knows I'm frightfully poor, but she doesn't really grasp that what for me is an incredibly large sum runs away in a single evening's amusement."

"Is she so awfully rich?"

"I should say so! She owns several big works and mines, and what not. I've never asked her much about the sources of her wealth—might look greedy you know. And she hardly ever mentions anything about it. She takes it for granted that others should work for her."

Stumpy felt cold all over, at the thought of how uncomfortable Fritz must be in the fair lady's company.

"Are you going to see her this evening?"

He shook his head.

"I make my work an excuse for not going—and, honestly, there's a lot to get through if I'm to be ready for next winter. But I shall always have time for

you, my pet, plenty of time in the morning or evening or . . .”

Fritz suddenly paused, conscience-stricken.

What had he been about to say?

No, no! She was far too pure and innocent ever to be asked to stay the night. . . .

Ah, if he only knew!

Stumpy's thoughts came back to the need for economy.

“No need for us ever to go out,” she said. “At most we'll take third-class tickets to Grunewald occasionally. What fun! The evenings are beautifully warm, and we shan't have anything to pay if we sit on the grass.”

And as she heard herself speaking those words she remembered Gudrun's mockery of “creeping Jesuses” who had nothing to offer a girl and yet wanted to marry and set up house together without delay.

She herself possessed a creeping Jesus now, and he was adding insult to injury by marrying some other woman!

What a silly old dear Gudrun was, in spite of all her apparent wisdom!

Fritz broke in on her meditations with an even better suggestion.

“Why go to Grunewald? Isn't it jolly enough up here? We're quite at home in this little nest under the eaves. You shall play the housewife, and come whenever you like, even when I am out.”

“Fine,” cried Stumpy unreflectingly. She did not trouble her head for the moment as to how such a desirable state of affairs was to be brought about.

But he had his plan ready.

“I'll give you my duplicate set of keys. My char

only uses them when she goes marketing, and I'll fix her up all right."

"Shall I be able to come here of an evening and wait till you get home?"

Stumpy's heart was all a-flutter in joyful anticipation.

Fritz looked at her dubiously for a while. Then, speaking with great deliberation, he said:

"No. That's out of the question. Often I don't get back till the small hours when I take my betrothed out. What would your people say about your coming home so late?"

She had not thought of that. Even today, it would be difficult to explain her absence from the supper table. If Herr Gerberding were not away she could use him as a stalking-horse. For the first time she began to long for her rich suitor's return. But perhaps Fritz had another reason for not wanting her to wait up for him? The same reason that had made him hesitate a moment ago! Stumpy sighed. It did not always contribute to one's happiness to be taken for an innocent. Yet that was precisely what made Fritz such a lovable darling! Well, she'd have to be content with what she could get.

The room was growing dark. Stumpy was hungry. She had eaten nothing since lunch time.

"Couldn't I get us some food?"

Fritz lay back on the sofa, with a comfortable smile.

"Would you really?" he said, stroking her hand.

For all answer, Stumpy sprang to her feet and ran into the kitchen. She hauled forth the maternal ham, and exclaimed delightedly. Such a ham was not to be seen every day. A real country ham, home-cured and all! But Fritz's carving knife was blunt, and Stumpy was hard put to it to cut nice thin slices. She found a

loaf of bread and some butter, and two bottles of beer had been put to cool under the water tap.

The "Adlon" could not produce any food more savoury than this. Even in the restaurant on the ship, the meal had not tasted so good, although fresh air, and especially the air on a large expanse of water like that lake, was proverbially excellent as an appetiser.

They did not switch on the light, for it was much more cosy to sit in the gloaming.

From without, the street lamps cast a soft golden glow, throwing into silhouette the fine tracery of the trees which looked like a trellis work in front of the windows. The slender branches waved to right and to left, and the delicate twigs, some of them frail as gossamer, formed a halo around the tops.

It was as if one were walking through a field of very tall corn on a night when the full moon was rising, and filtering its ruddy glow through and among the stalks, auguring a bountiful harvest.

Stumpy sat with her head pillowed on Fritz's shoulder, while his arm encircled her waist.

And she thought:

"How lovely! I'd just adore being the wife of a land-steward!"

Chapter Fifteen

STUMPY LEARNS HOW TO DANCE THE GENTLEMAN'S STEPS

A VERY happy period began in Stumpy's life.

With the duplicate set of keys Fritz had given her, she could come and go whenever she pleased. And she made full use of her opportunities, so that she spent more time up there under the eaves than she did in the family circle.

It hardly affected her enjoyment whether she found him at home or not. If the nest was empty at her arrival, she had plenty of time to tidy up and set about other useful avocations in which his comfort was the centre of interest.

His clothes were in a bad way, linings torn, buttons missing; and the yellowy-grey woollen socks—a misfortune in any case!—were greatly in need of darning.

Since there was no hanging cupboard she put up some large hooks in the bathroom, got some coat-hangers, and thus gave the two suits he possessed a chance of regaining more orderly lines. The coat-hangers had been purloined from Herbert's store, and the "dust sheet" Stumpy used to keep the garments clean was a treasure of Mamma's, a huge shawl which had belonged to Grannie, and was kept in camphor and tissue paper at the bottom of a chest. If ever it came to be missed, Stumpy would have to unearth it in some unlikely corner, and Mamma would be so delighted at getting it back that she'd as likely as not forget to ask how it had got there.

Indeed, a good many things found their way to Fritz's rooms from Stumpy's home. Mamma would just have to look for them!

Especially enjoyable were the evenings Fritz and Stumpy spent alone under the gables. For prudence' sake she ate her meals, for the most part, with her family. But she had discovered a special course of lectures she could ostensibly attend, a course delivered by an impecunious pundit wishing to supplement the deficiencies of his academic income. What marvellous things Stumpy might have learned if she had followed the lectures! All about the position of women in contemporary China, the wonders of the Maya civilisation, ancient Egyptian picture writing, and a host of other scraps of information. But she preferred to pass the time she should by rights have spent upon the "improvement of her mind," in lolling on a certain threadbare sofa with gold claws at the ends of the arms. True, she had gone to a couple of the lectures in order to give herself a countenance should she be asked inconvenient questions. But ten wild horses would not have succeeded in dragging her to any more.

Her greatest longing was to await Fritz's homecoming, no matter the lateness of the hour. But he had said no, and she dared not go against his wishes. Still, she could leave behind a memento of her visit. And this she never failed to do.

At first she would use up the photos of herself which she had had taken for Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim. They had been printed on postcards, and when she saw how pleased Fritz was with these silent messengers she made up her mind never to miss an occasion for leaving one to speak for her.

Her supply of these pictures, however, though presenting her in a variety of positions, was soon ex-

hausted. She must think of something else. Failing her own portrait the next best messenger was, indubitably, a flower. But flowers were expensive at the best of times.

Now, Doctor Shadow's rooms were always crammed with flowers, brought by lady patients and presented with a bashful air; other bouquets were left in the hall and brought in later by Johnny, whose face on these occasions wore a leer full of comical understanding. It was Stumpy's duty to attend to these offerings, and to see they were tastefully arranged. Every day it was the same, so that yesterday's lovely nose-gays had to make room for to-day's. It would have been a wicked waste, thought Stumpy, to fill a florist's pocket with her hard-earned pennies while all these beauties went abegging.

So as soon as the doctor had gone off, she selected the choicest blossoms to take to her Fritz—not many, of course; that would have seemed strange; he might have asked awkward questions; just enough to give her lover pleasure. She never took the trouble to hide her depredations from Johnny's inquisitive eyes. He nodded with a knowing air, for did he not make raids likewise?

It was such fun to place the flowers in some corner where Fritz would not see them at once when he got back. She loved to picture his surprise on finding them. Sometimes she would put the vase between the pillars of the cupboard where he kept his photographs stuck in the looking glass. At other times she would, with a pencil, dibble the choice blossoms separately into the damp earth where the corn was growing. Or she would tie them to the iron railings at the head of his bed so that he would first be made aware of their presence by the perfume they exhaled.

She was ever on the hunt for new hiding-places, for fresh and quaint little tricks, for unexpected ways of proving to him how much she shared in his life in spite of their enforced separation. If ever he did happen to ask where all these beautiful flowers came from, she would look innocent, and reply that they had served as floral decorations for her father's shop and were to be thrown away at the end of the day.

But the finest gift of all was, indubitably, the pair of silk socks Stumpy had so laboriously knitted. She had frequently referred to her pet aversion in his attire, saying:

"You'll ruin all your chances of a happy marriage if you persist in wearing such awful footgear. You simply must do something about it. In the end, no woman who has any pretensions to good taste, can put up with such things as those."

But he was not easily to be persuaded. He felt in duty bound to wear these socks, for his mother, following an ancient custom, had knitted them with her own hands.

Poor Stumpy! She had often been sorely tempted to throw them in the fire—there were only six pairs left. Instead she had patiently darned them!

At last the day came when the wine-coloured works of art were ready to hand over to their rightful owner. They were so dark in hue, that the red seemed no more than the reflexion of hidden sunshine, and they made a delicious scrunchy noise when one squeezed them. A lovelier pair was not to be got at the most fashionable of outfitters.

Stumpy swallowed nervously as she offered her gift.

"You see, Fritz dear"—oh, how difficult it was to explain!—"You see, I don't want to feel that I am in any way to blame by allowing you to spoil your married

happiness for the sake of those horrible socks, and so . . .”

“Why on earth should you be to blame . . . ?”

“. . . anyway, I can't remain inactive so long as such a danger is in the air, and I thought . . . and so I have . . . You see, dear, I knitted them myself and so you simply can't refuse to take them . . . Please, please put them on!”

There! Now she had got over the worst. Thank goodness, he did not seem offended. He took Stumpy in his arms, and said:

“If it weren't so utterly sweet, it would be grotesque. My darling, my pet.”

He stroked her cheek and hair—but he did not kiss her, he would remain true to his vow. Poor Stumpy, secretly, longed for him to break it!

So he put them on. But now his shoes, of course, were all wrong; and he must have garters—these socks could not be allowed to fall in festoons round his ankles as those detestable yellowy-grey ones had done.

They made a date for the following afternoon to go and buy a nice pair of shoes and the necessary garters. He needed mothering, and Stumpy wanted to be in at the choosing. No one could imagine how helpless men of this sort were in the ordinary affairs of life—especially when they came from the backwoods like dear Fritz.

She took counsel with Herbert whenever she felt that her own knowledge of matters sartorial failed. He was always ready with advice as to the fashionable colours for neckties, and when it was the correct thing to wear them tied in a bow and when not.

This brother of hers came in handy for other things as well.

One day Fritz had said that Elinor—that was his fiancée's name—had complained of his not being able to dance.

"We sit there like wax figures," he went on; "and if it were not that I don't want to miss any opportunity of being with you, pet, I'd go and have some lessons."

Stumpy had often tried to persuade him to do so, but he had fresh excuses ready every time. His studies, his laboratory work, anything served his turn to get out of the threatening *corvée*.

At last Stumpy took the matter in hand, and said resolutely as she pushed the table back against the wall:

"You're going to begin, here and now!"

So saying, she placed his arm around her, and started whistling the tune of a foxtrot.

He did not prove a very apt pupil. Or was it that she lacked pedagogical talent? She tried to show him the steps, but discovered that though she could dance so well herself, by instinct as it were, she had not a notion how the thing was done. Her teacher had been right when she despaired of ever teaching Stumpy to dance!

"Next time I'll be able to show you everything correctly," she said as she took leave. "You'll see! I'll be as good an instructor as the ballet-master at the opera . . ."

"Herbert, old thing, it's such an age since I did any dancing. I've forgotten all the steps. Do show me how it's done, there's a dear."

"Nonsense! Why, you're a regular little genius at dancing. You can do anything you like."

"What did you say I was?" Stumpy asked, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Don't be silly, you know quite well what I mean."

But she honestly did not know what he meant. And yet, since Herbert himself said so, she had to believe. . . . Then . . . ? Overwhelmed with joy, she felt as if she were flying when, with Herbert's arm around her, she was put through her paces.

Still, she could not long indulge in such blissful sensations. Fritz's plight in face of the fair Elinor's claims rose vividly before her mind.

"Please, Herbert, show me just how one does the individual steps. Especially the steps the lady's partner has to do. I want to know the gentleman's steps. Please!"

"What on earth do you want that for?"

"Well, surely one dances better if one knows all about everything . . ."

"Bunkum! Still, if you're set on it. But we must get a gramophone. . . ."

Stumpy seized eagerly on the suggestion.

"A gramophone! Hurrah! Just the thing. But we'll be content with a little one. I don't want you to incur very big expenses for my sake, Herbert dear. . . ."

Quick as lightning she had realised that a small instrument could easily be conveyed to and fro from Fritz's rooms. Herbert saw through her game, and kissed her affectionately on the tip of her nose, so greatly did he enjoy her puckish fib.

As speedily as possible, the gramophone materialised. It was so compact, one could slip it under an arm. Next day, at eight o'clock in the morning Stumpy was already knocking at Herbert's door, begging for the lessons to begin. He opened in his pyjamas, and seemed rather sleepy still, but was far from being in ill humour at the prospect. They worked hard for

about three-quarters of an hour. Then it was time for her to be off.

"An hour or so more, and we'll be through with it," said Herbert. "Then I am going to claim my reward."

"What reward?"

"An improvised dance such as we did that evening some time back. I can't forget it. Even if we're never to dance them in public, I want to work out two or three such duets with you. But to do that, you must learn some fundamentals. Unfortunately it's too late for you to go in for dancing as a profession. But I expect your limbs are supple enough to acquire a few extra-difficult movements. Well—agreed?"

Red and blue stars flickered before Stumpy's eyes. To dance! Really to dance again! To dance with an expert like Herbert! Oh, what joy!

"Agreed," she stammered.

Of course, Herr Gerberding would demur. Some time or the other she had promised. . . . Oh, what did such a promise matter now!

In spite of its exiguous size, the gramophone proved a heavy burden as Stumpy carried it to Fritz's digs. Still, it was well worth the labour. The lessons were going along fine. "One, two—pause—three!" Or, "when you turn you must bring your feet together." Or, "always start off with the left foot."

Stumpy issued her orders, and Fritz obeyed as best he could. He soon mastered the foxtrot. Nor did he find much difficulty in learning to waltz. But the Charleston with its syncopated rhythm—that fairly stumped him.

"One more good practice, and you'll be able to in-

vite her to take the floor with you. And don't forget, when you sit down, to pull your trousers up slightly over the knee. That's the proper thing for a man to do. Besides, she'll then be able to admire your nice silk socks."

Since by the time Stumpy left it was already dark, Fritz carried the gramophone as far as her door, and she accepted his service right willingly. But when he proposed that he should fetch it the following afternoon, she was up in arms immediately.

"Certainly not," she cried. "A gentleman must never be seen carrying parcels in the street. At Christmas time, perhaps; but not at any other time. I'll just have to carry the monster myself."

He dared not protest, and accepted her dictum meekly, so completely was he by now under her thumb.

Two days later, Herbert claimed his reward.

He locked the door of his room against all possible intruders, and, while the gramophone spouted forth its music, great things were performed.

Stumpy was ruthlessly put through her paces. At times she felt as if her limbs would break. But whenever she flung herself on his bed exhausted, he would haul her to her feet again, and the mad dance would begin anew.

Now nothing was left to chance inspiration. She had to do what he told her to do.

"Where on earth have you picked all this up?" Stumpy asked in surprise.

"Just looking on, and imitating what I have seen other people do. Then I had a few lessons with a Russian ballet-master. And so, gradually, all the movements have become second nature."

"By the way, how's your good match getting on?"

Herbert laughed scornfully.

"Hardly wish for it now. All they want is some one to act as a blind to their misdemeanours. Soon as ever a chap begins to mention marriage . . . No, it's not good enough. If you carry your marriage schemes to a satisfactory end, you'll give me a helping hand, I know. If you don't succeed, then . . ."

"Yes?—Then?"

"Don't ask me just now. I've got my plans."

Stumpy enquired no further, but an inexplicable hope filled her breast. It did not take any definite shape so far, and yet the vague surmise of happiness in store was very present all the same.

"Frau von Nadolny."

The trouble was that the mistress-to-be of Nadolnien went by the exquisite name of Elinor, instead of by that of Stumpy!

Chapter Sixteen

THE USES OF A BUMP OF THE FOREHEAD

ONE day towards the middle of August Herr Gerberding returned.

His advent was announced early in the morning by the arrival of a huge basket of flowers which placed that first floral offering Stumpy had received completely in the shade, so vast and so costly did it appear.

"Good," thought Stumpy, "I'll be able to take Fritz a really big bunch of flowers to-day. And I shan't need to lie about where I got them."

A note lay concealed among the blossoms, and its perusal rather damped her pleasure.

"I hope that neither you nor your parents will object to my resuming our nightly outgoing, dear Fräulein Annemarie. I must admit that my six weeks' journey, although mainly devoted to seeking fresh business openings—a matter in which I am thankful to say I have been eminently successful—has also given me an opportunity of testing my feelings towards you. How true are the words of the poet: 'Test thyself thou who thinkest of binding thyself.' I therefore trust that the same quiet security of purpose has taken possession of your heart as it has of mine. In the hope that such is the case, I shall take the liberty of calling for you at your home this evening at seven."

Bother the man! Just the very evening she had fixed up to be with Fritz. Suppose Herr Gerberding should resume his daily claims upon her leisure? Why, then, there would never be any time for Fritz at all.

Mamma and Papa studied this missive closely. They were trying to glean from the wording whether Herr Gerberding had made up his mind to take the decisive step, or whether he was going to withdraw at the eleventh hour. They trembled twixt hope and fear.

When Stumpy declared that it was really a shame to stop in the middle of the course of interesting and instructive lectures, Mamma quite lost her temper for once.

"If you think you are going to make such falderals a pretext for not being with your future fiancé you are very much mistaken. I'm not going to let you make a ninny of yourself, and spoil all your chances of future happiness. So there!"

Papa, too, spoke reproachfully.

"I'm greatly impressed with his knowledge of our German poets. One need have no fear of following such a man, even if he be going into the wilderness. You simply must accede to his wishes."

Stumpy was at a loss; but at that moment Gudrun came to the rescue.

"Look here, my dears. It seemed to me that poor little Stumpy was quite fagged out by that perpetual gadding about, and we ought not to let it start all over again. After all, the main thing is that the child should look her best, and if she's to do that, she must get her sleep out. Besides, the higher we hang the grapes, the keener will Stumpy's suitor be to reach them. He'll be all the more in a hurry to declare himself, you'll see."

Gudrun's arguments seemed eminently reasonable to Mamma and Papa, who forthwith proceeded to give Stumpy further good advice as to how she might encourage Herr Gerberding to declare himself. She was to assume a charming melancholy; in all innocence

she might suddenly raise her eyes to his; she might even make as if to touch his hand, and then withdraw at the last minute in maidenly bashfulness. These were things calculated to loosen a suitor's tongue, and to bring him to the point.

"If after this reunion," Mamma concluded her harangue, "you play your cards well, he may make his proposal this very day."

Stumpy felt she was in honour bound to do her best to gratify her parents' wishes. It was her duty to do everything in her power to hasten on the wedding day. The whole of her future turned upon her cleverness. On her adroitness the comfort of herself and her family depended. She must not disappoint her people.

Happily she got away rather earlier than usual from Dr. Shadow's, and had time hastily to collect the finest blooms from Herr Gerberding's basket of flowers and hurry off to Fritz's digs.

He had not yet returned from work, and all she could do was to scribble a few words on a scrap of paper. "He's back. I've got to go out with him. Try and see Elinor to-night, so that we may both be free to-morrow. Always your Stumpy."

"What on earth have you been doing to your lovely basket of flowers," said Mamma on Stumpy's return. "It looks like a plucked fowl!"

"Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim called to ask me to go for a walk. But of course I couldn't go to-day, so I gave them a few," answered Stumpy, fibbing boldly.

Mamma was in despair.

"How ever shall we make it look shipshape for Herr Gerberding's visit," she cried, wringing her hands. "It's the first thing he's sure to look for."

"I should hope his first glance would be for me,"

protested Stumpy demurely. "Chuck the silly old basket into the dustbin. I'll tell him it's in my bedroom. He can't ask to go there!"

Mamma refused of course to throw the basket away, but she removed it from the sitting-room. Stumpy scored a triumph when, later on, Herr Gerberding, in all his finery, discreetly ardent and gaily earnest in demeanour, arrived. She thanked him prettily for his beautiful gift, and blushing declared she had placed them in her room, sufficiently removed from her bedside, so that she might fall asleep with their fragrance delighting her senses, and yet not run any risk of having a headache in the morning.

Herr Gerberding was so deeply moved he could find no words to answer her, and Mamma gazed at him with solemn eyes, as much as to say: "Just look what an exquisite creature I've brought into the world, solely for your enjoyment."

Still, he did not make his declaration that evening. It was the same old story, how a young couple thinking of settling down to a life's companionship could not be too careful before the fatal step was taken. They must first get to know one another intimately, must search their own heart and the mind of the prospective mate. Such an intimate acquaintanceship was not to be achieved all at once. Only by learning one another's peculiarities in every detail could two beings hope to achieve that mutual accord and understanding which . . . and so on and so forth. It was amazing to find how fertile the man's brain was in elaborating the theme, and how frequently he resorted to it in the course of conversation.

They had crab mayonnaise and salad for supper. Stumpy did not try in any way to conceal her preference for such savoury dishes. Whereupon Herr Ger-

berding, profiting by so admirable an occasion for showing off his erudition, quoted Schiller:

"Ah, my dear Fräulein Annemarie, if strength and gentleness mate together, if sweet links itself to sour, oh, then fair harmony bides for ever. Let us drink a toast to this fair harmony. There, did you not notice what a silvery tone came from our glasses as we clinked? Good augury, indeed!"

"Now he's going to come to the point," thought Stumpy, her heart beating wildly in expectation.

Nothing of the sort! On the contrary, he expatiated on the marvellous success of his journey in the Rhine country and the Ruhr. The barons of industry had not only received him cordially when he called at their offices, but had thrown open the doors of their fine houses and received him into the bosom of their families. He had stayed with the Krupps at H^ügel, with the Schmitzes at Soest, with the Jansens at Crefeld, with the Dumonts at Hamborn; had come and gone as he pleased; had been welcomed with open arms by the wives and daughters of these magnates. If—er—he had not—er—in a sense considered himself bound—er—he might . . .

His pause was full of significance, and Stumpy could not help wondering how great might be the compensation he would expect from her in days to come as earnest of his present sacrifice.

When, towards midnight that same evening, she let herself into the house, she found every one still up, expectant and agog for her news. She was assailed with questions.

"Well, has he declared himself? Has he proposed?"

Sadly she shook her head, and slipped shamefacedly into her room, as if she had done them an injury.

Even on the morrow, when she went to Fritz's, she felt uneasy, and humiliated by her present situation.

Had she not, that evening at Herr Samuel's when they had met again, spoken of her betrothal as a foregone conclusion? Had she not said that immediately after Herr Gerberding's return the engagement was to be officially announced? Fine lot of announcing now! She felt like a swindler caught in the act. What a blessing that Fritz was not the questioning sort! All he did when he saw her downcast was to put his arm around her and comfort her.

She laid her head on his breast, and listened to his heart beating and his watch ticking, and felt absolved from all her conscience might reproach her with.

And when they took their accustomed places between the gilded claws of the sofa, he did not seem interested to know anything further about yesterday's meeting with Herr Gerberding. All he wanted to know was how they could best arrange for their own future meetings.

He himself had no telephone, but there was one in the shop downstairs, and the owner was a decent sort of a chap who would always be happy to oblige. Elinor did not take matters very peacefully when he had occasion to put her off, but Fritz was quite willing to face the music.

"No, no," Stumpy protested. "You must not run the risk of offending her. She might cancel the engagement. Whenever Gudrun has a good old row with any of her friends she just snaps her fingers and let's him go. I can't be party to such an unfortunate issue to the affair. It would be better for me to put off my Herr Gerberding than for you to put off your Elinor."

But he could not allow Stumpy to treat Herr Gerberding in such an offhand manner either. Thus they

bandied words to and fro for a while, each vying with the other to act generously towards those they had every intention to deceive. At last they agreed that the first claim on their time must be Fräulein Elinor and Herr Gerberding. Once they had acquitted themselves of their duty towards their respective fiancés, they could give themselves up to their love.

Finding that Fritz persisted in referring to Herr Gerberding as her betrothed, Stumpy felt she would not be loyal were she any longer to disguise the true state of affairs. She therefore confided the whole of her trouble to her friend.

All he said in answer was:

"I ought to be glad. But how can I? You are lost to me in any case. And if the man is kind to you. . . ."

"Oh, he'll be that right enough," cried Stumpy with conviction. "And he's solid and hard-working—if only he was less of a bungler in the love-making business he would not be such a bad asset after all."

"I wish I could say as much of my fiancée," said Fritz ruefully. "But in the first place she never does a hand's turn. In the second place she is far from being kindly disposed towards me. And in the third place . . ."

Here he stopped, either because he did not know what the third count against the lady was, or, knowing, did not wish to give her away. He pressed his face into Stumpy's hair, and she snuggled up closer, so that she felt like a bird in its nest when night has fallen and it tucks its head under its wing.

They sat still and silent as the dusk gathered round them, until the street lamp was lighted, and began to play the part of moon. But it no longer shone as of yore through the halms of the corn. The harvest had long since been cut and garnered. All that remained

was a withered bundle of straw lying forgotten in the corner of the attic. How was Stumpy to know that the ears on that one stook held promise of more plentiful harvests to come?

The weeks came and went with little change.

Stumpy grew more and more uneasy. When, after an evening spent with Herr Gerberding, she mounted the stairs to her room, her heart was in her boots from apprehension lest her parents should question her then and there. As a matter of fact she knew quite well that her parents were not waiting up for her, since they had long since given up all hope that this suitor would make proof of his conqueror's nature.

Even Fritz was becoming restive. It was as if he had been affronted in his personal dignity because his Stumpy's charm—of which he himself was so keenly aware—had failed to exercise its sway. The look of enquiry he cast at her every time she visited him rankled in her heart.

Above all, Gudrun showed her annoyance.

"We shall have to light a fire under him," she once laughingly observed. "Or, as one does with puppies which haven't learned their manners, we shall have to rub his nose in it, otherwise he may forgo his right of option!"

And Stumpy was hard put to dissuade her sister from sending Herbert to sound Herr Gerberding and find out what precisely were his "intentions." Stumpy knew only too well the effect her brother's supercilious demeanour might have on her laggard suitor.

Then, at last, something happened one evening which brought matters to a climax.

Although Herr Gerberding was so ignorant of dancing that he could not distinguish the tango from the

foxtrot, he was fond of taking Stumpy to places devoted to this amusement. The mere fact of looking at other couples executing steps with prowess gave Stumpy a great deal of pleasure, though to tread the measures with so clumsy a partner as Herr Gerberding was a penance rather than a satisfaction. He was always out of step, and in preference danced upon Stumpy's toes rather than upon the floor. On one such occasion he had trodden so heavily that he had broken off a button that held her shoe in place.

Coming back to her table, Stumpy reached down to remedy the damage. But Herr Gerberding misunderstood the manœuvre. Imagining she had dropped lipstick or powder-puff, and desirous of playing his part as attentive squire, he suddenly bent forward to pick up the offending article, and came into violent collision with Stumpy's forehead. She saw sparks for a moment, and then sank back in blissful unconsciousness.

Awakened by Herr Gerberding's cries of alarm, she felt as if she had been seized by a thousand hands and lifted up from the ground on to a chair. A cool stream of eau-de-Cologne bathed the nape of her neck. She could easily by now have opened her eyes, but she felt so comfortable as she was, cared for, the centre of interest, that she determined to let things take their course a moment longer.

Then she heard Herr Gerberding's voice:

"My betrothed is not coming to, I fear. Can't some one call a doctor to see after my fiancée?"

"Aha!" thought Stumpy. "What's that he's saying?"

And, because she was very anxious to hear him speak the word again, she resolutely kept her eyes closed as if she had not yet come out of her swoon.

An energetic voice now stood out from among the confusion of chatter.

"I'm a doctor. Can I do anything? What's the matter?"

Herr Gerberding:

"Here, this way, my fiancée, she's had a knock, she's fainted, and we can't bring her to."

"Just keep her quiet," said the clear voice of the stranger, and at the same time a cool, strong hand seized her arm, and a finger was laid on her pulse.

Stumpy now considered the moment opportune to give a sign of life. When she opened her eyes, she saw a young man she had never seen before bending over her. His breath smelt strongly of tobacco, and she felt that at any cost she must get rid of him. Snatching her hand away from his grasp, she turned aside, and he was not slow to understand that his services were no longer required. He murmured a few directions, among which she caught the words "quiet" and "better take her home," and was about to withdraw with a bow, when Herr Gerberding shook him heartily by the hand, saying:

"We, my fiancée and myself, are under a great obligation to you. Thank you very much for your opportune help. My name is Gerberding, and I am staying at the 'Adlon.' If you will take the trouble to call one day, I shall have great satisfaction in showing you my appreciation in a solidier form than words. . . ."

He got no further, for the young man had already disappeared.

But this doctor had really been a saviour, little as he himself might suspect the fact. Had he not conjured a word out of Herr Gerberding that committed

this laggard lover of hers at length to take the decisive step?

The crowd which had collected around the stricken fair one, now dispersed.

Herr Gerberding sat mumchance by her side. After a long and troubled silence he said:

"Forgive me, dear Fräulein Annemarie, for taking the matter so arbitrarily in hand. But, under the circumstances, what else was I to do? Any other relationship than that of an engaged couple might have compromised you. My hand was forced, you must admit. Now that it has happened, I do hope you will see your way to making it an accomplished fact, and . . ."

Stumpy sighed. Her fears had once more been aroused that he intended to withdraw what the presence of strangers alone had forced from his lips.

But even that danger seemed now to have been cleared from her path.

No one must henceforward doubt for a moment that she was the affianced bride of this man.

Her first thought was for those at home.

"How pleased they will be!"

Her second thought, rather a rueful one, was for Fritz.

"He'll be freed from anxiety now!"

For the moment, however, she was faced by a very urgent problem: how was she to answer Herr Gerberding who sat looking at her intently with his owl-like eyes.

"Oh, dear," she said at length, "this is very sudden."

"Everything comes suddenly in this life," he replied sententiously. "If you wish for time to turn matters over in your mind . . ."

"Not that," exclaimed Stumpy to herself. She

thought of Mamma's recipe, and gently laid her hand on his. What else could he do but clasp the gage?

In this way the affair seemed to have been settled to the satisfaction of both parties.

He began to discuss his plans. The main object of his journey to Europe had now been achieved. He could forthwith engage a cabin for his return to Argentine—a double cabin this time. . . .

Her whole nature rose in revolt at such precipitation. Surely he must remember that her father and mother did not wish her to be married before her seventeenth birthday? He must at least wait till then. "Two and a half months," she thought. "Two and a half months to encompass the happiness of a lifetime."

After that she would be dead. Sixty, perhaps seventy years of death in life. Might not death be gracious in her case, and come to her relief earlier? Ah, if only she could be sure of dying soon. Then nothing would matter, nothing at all.

Through these private meditations, Herr Gerberding's voice reached her from time to time. He was talking of the trousseau she would require; of how she could not take more than two trunks with her; of the elegance among society ladies over there, an elegance Europeans were liable to overlook; of his hopes that she would become the darling of the German colony, for she was young and pretty, whereas most of the others were disobligingly old and plain. . . . On and on and on he talked! If only he would let go her hand. Well, she had nothing to complain of—was she not his affianced bride? She was no longer free to go against his wishes.

Worse was to come.

He sat closer to her than was his custom as they

drove home, and to crown her disgust he asked. . . . What was that he was pleading for? "A little kiss, a little kiss to seal the pact!"

What could she do but yield? It was all part of being engaged. She closed her eyes, and raised her cold lips to his.

Herr Gerberding was overjoyed—even by her coldness!

"One can tell in a moment," he exclaimed, "that these lips have never been kissed before."

Poor Stumpy!

Her thoughts flew to Dr. Dora Keilholz, the lovely young woman she had met at Herr Samuel's. Dora had said much the same thing about herself—and it had been true in her case, though a couple of hours later she too had learned the lesson of the first kiss.

They drew up at Stumpy's home, and Herr Gerberding begged leave to present himself next day in the forenoon. Stumpy nodded gracious assent, but when, in the half-open door, he proceeded to claim the privilege of a fiancé and tried to kiss her, she slipped through his hands and fled up the darkened stair.

She paused for breath at the first landing, and listened for a moment to Herr Gerberding's car as it receded into the distance.

There were no lights in any of the windows—she had seen as much from the street. That meant her people were not waiting up for her. It would be idiotic to rouse them. Time enough to tell them the good news to-morrow. Gudrun had probably not come home yet.

One person in all the world there was who must be told without delay. He shared in every joy and every sorrow of her life. If Herr Gerberding insisted on

his full rights as her betrothed, she might not have time to get round to see Fritz to-morrow, nor the day after. Was her lover not to learn of this important event in her life until some happy chance should make a meeting possible?

Of course he had categorically forbidden her to come to his rooms at night. But what did that matter at so momentous a juncture as the present?

His keys clinked cheerily against her keys in her handbag. She had never let them out of her sight for fear of some one finding them and asking awkward questions.

Oh, quick, quick! Down the stairs. Out through the front door. Along the empty street. Not a soul to see her and blab of her fugue.

A pity his staircase was unlighted. But she knew every inch of the way so well. She slid her fingers lightly along the banisters until she reached his aerie.

It did not matter to her whether she found him at home or not. If he were there she would wake him; if he were not there, she would lie down on the beloved sofa with the gilded claws, and listen for his return.

She closed the passage door noiselessly. The distance between it and the next door seemed endless. Not a ray of light penetrated the darkness.

At last she found the switch. There were his coat and hat hanging on the rack. He was at home. She felt a tightening in the throat. The sitting-room was empty. A faint beam from the street lamp penetrated the gloom.

"Who's there?" came in clear tones from the bedroom, followed immediately by a click.

She knew what that meant. He always kept an ancient pistol on his bedside table.

Suppose he shot his Stumpy. Irony of fate! She dared not go forward, but said softly:

"It's only me, Fritz, me, Stumpy."

"You? What do you want at so late an hour?"

His voice sounded anxious rather than pleased. Indeed, it seemed to Stumpy that he was in unfriendly mood.

"I've got something awfully important to tell you."

"Come along then."

He switched on the light in the bedroom, and she hastened to join him.

There he was, sitting up in his camp bedstead, as she had often pictured him. A button was missing at the neck of his pyjamas. She ought to have sewn that on yesterday afternoon. Very remiss of her!

She threaded her way among the tables and chairs where his experimental work was spread out, and at last came to rest on the edge of his bed. Seizing both his hands, she said:

"Just fancy! Herr Gerberding has at last proposed. All he wants now is to wait till my birthday to . . ."

Tears came to her relief. She flung her arms round Fritz's neck, and as he sank back on the pillows, she cuddled on to his shoulder and gave free vent to her weeping.

Having brought no handkerchief with her, she dried her eyes on a corner of the sheet. He stroked her hair, and, when she looked into his dear eyes she saw that they, too, were brimming with tears.

That made her start crying afresh, and the deluge threatened never to cease.

At last he roused himself to say:

"It's getting awfully late, darling; you really must go home."

"No, no, no, no!"

She wanted to stay with him till dawn; indeed, she would fain have stayed with him till doomsday. But his face all at once became stony and cold. Nothing frightened her more. So when he bade her go and wait for him in the sitting-room, she obeyed meekly. Her weeping fit had swelled her eyes and nose to such an extent she seemed to be afflicted with a cold in the head.

Thus, right gloomily, Stumpy's longed-for day of betrothal at last came to an end.

Chapter Seventeen

A REALLY GOOD MATCH

NEXT morning Gudrun came up to Stumpy's bed and, leaning over her sister, said:

"How on earth did you get that bump on your forehead?"

"My fiancé," muttered Stumpy, and turned her face to the wall.

"Don't be silly," answered Gudrun, tickling Stumpy in the ribs until she was fully awake.

Stumpy yawned and stretched, and then told Gudrun all that had happened on the previous evening.

"I wonder what your friend will have to say to this?" asked the elder girl after she had kissed Stumpy and wished her joy of her engagement.

"What friend?" enquired Stumpy innocently.

"Don't you try to bluff me," expostulated Gudrun.

"Do you mean Willi or Kurt or Hans Joachim?" continued Stumpy, still in the same vein.

"You have become such a crafty little beggar during these last three months, you'll soon be able to hold your own even with me," laughed Gudrun. "One does not get so spry unless one has something to hide." She withdrew to her own corner of the room, her face shrouded in meditation as she murmured to herself, what she had so frequently murmured before during recent weeks: "I do wish I could remember where I had met the man before."

"We're to sail as soon as possible after my birthday," Stumpy was saying, in the hope of giving the

conversation another turn. "He says he is going to take a state cabin. He says that's the smartest thing one can have, and the dearest."

"Are you thinking of writing to one another?" asked Gudrun, determined if possible to stick to her theme.

"Why should we when we're sailing together," parried Stumpy.

"Do be serious for a moment, Stumpy! You are going to be married, aren't you? You are sailing far away to another continent, aren't you? Well, what are you thinking of doing about *him*? If you were a decent little sister you'd leave him as a legacy to me!"

Stumpy felt really annoyed.

"You're nothing but a common or garden legacy-hunter, that's what you are. I'm just determined not to confide a word to you. You can find out anything you like about Herr Gerberding, but as to your finding out anything about any one else—no, absolutely nothing!"

Gudrun's heart smote her. She had been too brusque; that she fully recognised. So instead of scolding Stumpy for her reticence, she merely muttered to herself:

"If only I could recall where I had met him before!"

When Stumpy got up, she had to face Mamma and Papa with the news. Now there was no end of a hubbahoo.

"Oh, you darling! Dear child! May all happiness be yours, child! Love your husband! Don't give way to homesickness when you get settled over there. Even though an ocean divide us, you know that, somewhere in the world, are loving arms waiting to enfold

you . . ." and so on, and so on, quite in the old-world style.

"I say, have you had an accident, my deary?" asked Dr. Shadow that morning, pointing to the bump on Stumpy's forehead.

"Yes," she answered complacently, "I've got engaged."

At first he wrinkled up his face in disgust, but, thinking better of it, he said:

"I'm very pleased to hear it. I hope you'll be happy."

He was genuinely moved, it would appear; so much so that his old tenderness revived, and Stumpy who had for a time felt secure from his unsolicited attentions had her anxieties reawakened on this account. Still, being more experienced now, she knew how to fend him off.

She told him of her brilliant prospects, and yet he begged her to remain in his service until the first of October. Nothing loath, she accepted, for she quickly calculated that by this means she would have a good excuse for escaping Herr Gerberding at least during the day, without arousing his suspicions. Thus, too, she would be able to slip off to Fritz's from time to time when her work allowed.

It was never certain when she could get away from Dr. Shadow's; and if, as sometimes happened, Herr Gerberding took it into his head to come and wait for her outside the dentist's she had merely to assure herself of the fact by a glance from the window into the street to find a hundred and one tasks that needed her immediate attention. There was this to polish and that to put away; or she would steal along the passage to have a chat with the elderly mechanic in his work-

room—he being the only one who worked late in the house, for Johnny soon departed when the doctor had gone of an evening. The old man would continue the job he had in hand until far into the night sometimes, and was delighted to have this fresh young thing to enliven the long hours of vigil.

After a while, Herr Gerberding gave up that form of lover's persecution, and thus the way to Fritz became once again free.

"Fritz. My Fritz. My dear, dear, dear Fritz."

Such was the alpha and omega of her every dream. There were only two months and eight days left. Now only two months and three days. The time of respite dwindled horribly.

One afternoon, when she had stolen a few hours from Dr. Shadow in order to be with Fritz, and was sitting beside him on the sofa, he said:

"Do you know, darling, I believe there's a way of combining duty with pleasure, of being together of an evening, and yet ostensibly amusing ourselves with our respective fiancés."

Stumpy laughed gaily, as if he were going to tell her a fairy story.

"No, no, I'm quite serious," he protested. "Elinor found your photo among my belongings the other day. She was a bit jealous at first, but when I told her we had met quite casually at Herr Samuel's and that you were engaged to be married to a wealthy merchant from over the seas, her curiosity was aroused, and she suggested we might all four gad about together. But she'd like to make your acquaintance first. Would you mind calling on her when next you happen to have an afternoon free?"

Stumpy was not at all pleased at the prospect. She was frightened of the fair Elinor; she would rather

poison her than visit her; she was not sure that one fine evening when the quartet was out together, she might not be tempted to fling her arms round Fritz's neck, to the great scandal of all concerned. In the end, her longing to be with Fritz and to lose no opportunity of enjoying his company gained the upper hand over her detestation of seeing her rival in possession, and she agreed to act in accordance with the lady's wishes.

"But you must come with me," she stipulated. "I'll never have the courage otherwise."

He shook his head.

"If we were to go together, her suspicions might be aroused. I'll tell her that I sent her message to you by way of Herr Samuel—you'll have to manage the rest. She is always at home till seven."

Stumpy yielded, sore at heart. Three days later she presented herself at the boarding-house where Fräulein Elinor occupied three private rooms.

She was received by a gold-braided porter wearing a gold pince-nez. The door admitted her through a hall into a room whose colour-scheme was lilac and which was furnished with handsome armchairs and Venetian mirrors.

"My goodness," thought Stumpy. "She must do herself grand, if this is merely the common-room!"

And how nicely Stumpy fitted into her surroundings! It had been a good idea to put on her mauve georgette and the pretty shoes to match. When she caught sight of herself in one of the Venetian mirrors, she looked as if she were an essential part of the decorations.

The porter returned with a request that she should follow him. The lift was lilac, too!

A door opened, and she now went into apartments

which were entirely decorated and furnished in white: white chairs and tables; white fur rugs; even the picture-frames were white.

And in the midst of all the whiteness, a white figure rose slowly from a couch to greet her. Flowing white robes; queenly gestures. . . .

Stumpy stood in the doorway, and thought to herself:

"If only I were carrying a bandbox in my hand I'd look like a messenger girl compared to her."

Poor Stumpy was, indeed, quite discouraged by this dainty apparition.

A much be-ringed hand was stretched towards her, and a thin, querulous voice was saying:

"So young, and already engaged to be married? Come over here and sit by me. Do you care for cocktails? I've got a fine choice. There, on that little trolley table. Serve yourself."

Stumpy was so discountenanced that she had not the strength to refuse. She found a frail glass, like the cup of a flower, half filled with a golden-green liquid, standing at her elbow.

"Let's drink to our future friendship," said Fräulein Elinor Schmitz raising her glass towards Stumpy's and at the same time drawing her breath in so sharply between her pursed lips that she produced a whistling sound such as the younger girl had only heard men make. "Forgive me if I lie down again," continued Elinor in a plaintive voice as she returned her empty glass to the platter. "I'm not very well; always got a backache."

"Don't put yourself out for me," answered Stumpy obligingly as she lifted the white bearskin from the floor where it had slipped, and tucked it comfortably round her hostess. Confronted by one of so domineer-

ing a nature, poor little Stumpy felt more like a maid-servant than a visitor.

While Fräulein Elinor settled herself into her many cushions with a sigh that was half pleasurable and half painful, Stumpy sat quietly contemplating her.

The lips fell slightly apart and had been carefully shaped with the lipstick. A cloud of dull-brown hair glinting here and there with gold crowned her head. Perhaps the gold glints were the effect of gold dust sprinkled with a judicious hand, thought Stumpy. Cheeks and chin were dead white, save for the faintest blush of rouge on the cheek-bones. A picture at once voluptuous and charming was thus presented to Stumpy's gaze. But the eyes? They were cold, severe, challenging; in the photograph Fritz had shown her they had filled Stumpy with fear. Eyes that even when their owner meant kindly towards you gave you a pang at the heart.

Elinor lit a cigarette and held it smiling between her teeth. Stumpy was too shy to smoke. Thus comfortably settled, Elinor began to speak in her harsh, metallic voice.

"And now tell me all about your engagement. Then I'll tell you about mine. I can't for the life of me understand why we women ever take the trouble to marry—at least so long as we are young and know how to live our lives just as we wish."

As she pronounced the words "know how to live our lives" she made a strange gesture with her right hand, describing the form of an S, beginning at the bottom and ending at the top in mid-air. Then she went on:

"We've been told that we women must have a profession, and these wiseacres forget that ever since the dawn of man we have had the profession of wife and mother to perform. For my part, I've never special-

ised. I drive my own car, at other times I'm a photographer; I always design my own gowns; I play creditably in tennis tournaments, though the necessary training invariably brings on my backache so that in the end I've had to give up sport. . . . What is your profession, dear Fräulein Lüdicke?"

"I'm a dentist's assistant."

Fräulein Elinor looked surprised.

"What? Even now, when you are engaged to be married to a man of means?"

"My contract doesn't expire until October."

"Ah, that's interesting, especially since . . . By the way, talking of dentists, do you care for candy?"

So saying she offered Stumpy an oval box made of crystal and inlaid with gold. Lifting the cover, she disclosed an array of chocolate bonbons.

Stumpy did her best to suppress the shudder which invariably threatened to convulse her at the mere thought of placing a sweetmeat between her teeth, and politely refused.

Fräulein Elinor, on the contrary, partook of the dainties with a generous hand, and while she chewed she said:

"You see, I'm really very fond of them. And what have you to say against my eating as many as I like? Luckily my line is not in the least affected, no matter how much I indulge. Let's see, what was I saying? Oh, yes, I remember. About your dentist man. Unfortunately my teeth have to pay the penalty—or it may be a hereditary trait. Do you think—I'm sure you are to be relied upon for an unbiased opinion—do you think your chief is a really first-class man at his job?"

"Certainly, I should jolly well say he is," answered Stumpy, with an indescribable tone of pride in her

voice. "His practice is considered the smartest and most elegant in the whole of fashionable Berlin."

"Splendid!" cried Fräulein Elinor, jotting down the name, address, and telephone number. "Now," she resumed after a pause, "do tell me about the plans for your wedding."

Stumpy felt instinctively that all Herr Gerberding had to offer was very poor stuff compared to the luxury her hostess had been used to. She knew nothing about the extent of his fortune; and the fact that he could afford to put up at the "Adlon" and had two cars at home would not count for much in this quarter. So she said simply:

"He has a big importing business in Buenos Ayres, and is quite a decent sort. Indeed, he is most awfully kind. Yes, very kind."

"Um! Well and good." Then, raising herself on her elbow and frowning slightly: "Have your people made any enquiries yet?"

"Enquiries? Why?"

"To find out the state of his banking account, of course; to learn about the credit of his firm; to discover everything one ought to know about a man before one takes the final step. That's what information bureaux are for. They've got affiliations all over the world, and they know as much about us at the antipodes as in Soest or in Essen."

"Soest? Soest? The Schmitzes of Soest?" muttered Stumpy, searching her memory. "Where have I heard those two names before?" But she did not venture to ask the question aloud.

"If you care to have an introduction to the Argus people or to Schimmelpfeng, I'd be only too pleased to give you one. You see, I'm better placed in this matter than you are. 'Nadolny.' No mistaking that.

Good old family name. Raised to the nobility in the days of Frederick the Great. Quite different from the ordinary Nadolnys whose names you'll find by the dozen in the directory. Of course they are as poor as church mice. But they are honourably poor. That's one of the reasons I've got to be patient with my fiancé if he is not always dressed as smartly as I could wish."

Stumpy flushed on Fritz's behalf. Although he had now definitely abandoned wearing the offending socks, he was still far from doing justice to his birth, thought Stumpy. And quick as lightning the idea flashed through her mind: "I must persuade him to sell some of the family silver. Then I'll take him to Herbert's tailor, and . . ."

But the flow of Fräulein Elinor's conversation had not ceased. Her voice broke in on Stumpy's reflections:

"If only he were not so pernickety about money matters it would have made things easier—and yet, I rather admire him for never sponging. That comes from his aristocratic tradition. Of course one can't help smiling, but in the end one has to admit it is fine, and æsthetic, and all that. And when a girl has no better name to boast of than Schmitz, and when she has been born and bred in a place like Soest—well, we business people know how to appreciate such things . . ."

"The Schmitzes of Soest," murmured Stumpy again.

". . . in certain circles the Schmitzes of Soest are as highly esteemed as were once the Stinnes' of Mülheim, whilst in yet other circles the name doesn't cut any ice at all. That's why it is so refreshing to look forward to being called 'von Nadolny.' Why, the name's an introduction in itself, it's like placing a

circlet of gold on one's head. Do you know my fiancé at all well?"

"Oh, no," stammered Stumpy, blushing as she thought: "I can't be much redder than I am already. . . ."

"How did he come by your picture?"

Stumpy had been expecting this question, and had her answer pat.

"I happened to have one with me the day we met at Herr Samuel's. The photo pleased the three men of our company and they drew lots as to who should have it."

Fräulein Elinor appeared to be perfectly satisfied with the answer, for she immediately passed on to another topic.

"Apropos of this Herr Samuel. Another riddle set by my fiancé. I very much want to buy back the Nadolny estates . . ."

"Is that so?" put in Stumpy, as if she had never heard of such a thing.

"And why shouldn't I? There's nothing much to be gained by owning them, and at most I shall perhaps stay three weeks a year in the place, so there's no profit to be made. But 'Frau von Nadolny of Nadolny,' hasn't that a jolly sound?"

"Yes, yes," said Stumpy with a sigh that seemed to re-echo all the many times she herself had uttered the words.

"And yet, just think of it, he does not want to. He simply won't hear of it. And why? 'Because Herr Samuel is asking too stiff a price,' is what he said to me in his high and mighty way. But I ask you, if I don't make any bones about forking out as much, why should he worry? Some may call his objection 'no-

bility of soul'—but there is also another name for it."

Stumpy drew herself up stiffly.

"No, no," she said quietly but decisively, "I do not think there is any other name for it."

Fräulein Elinor bridled, and asked:

"What's up now, Fräulein Lüdicke?"

"I don't know what you mean," rejoined Stumpy, already regretting her little demonstration.

"By the way, your name, Lüdicke—Lüdicke. . . . I wonder where I have heard the name before."

"I've been puzzling my head in just the same way about yours, Fräulein Schmitz," retorted Stumpy.

"It's quite possible you've heard mine before," said Fräulein Elinor with a scornful smile. "The name is as common in Soest as Schulz or Miller are here. But in Soest it is coupled with a certain amount of achievement."

"Krupps at Hügel, Schmitz in Soest," exclaimed Stumpy as if intoning a litany. Then, suddenly, her eyes dancing with amusement, she went on: "Now I've got it. Herr Gerberding, that is to say my fiancé, has business connexions with your people, and has even been admitted to the family circle. He told me so himself."

"Ah?" Fräulein Elinor's tone was distinctly respectful as she said: "Then it must have been a very considerable piece of business he transacted. I should much like to meet your fiancé, we'd have quite a lot to tell one another about the Schmitz family—though he probably knows a good deal more about it than I! My connexion with them now is a purely business one."

Stumpy must have made a moue at this piece of information, for the young lady went on:

"Oh, you know, it's not so bad. Such business relations don't cut very deep—especially when one has a thoroughly competent solicitor to manage one's affairs. Of course one gets cheated at times. But I should really be interested to know how things are at present in the bosom of my worthy family. Why shouldn't we all four meet this evening? Anyway it's rather a bore always to be in tête-à-tête—don't you think so, too?"

So far as Herr Gerberding was concerned it was only too true, thought Stumpy. "But if only I could always be with Fritz, I'd never feel tired or bored." She did not give her thoughts words, but sat demurely with her eyes downcast.

"Yes, yes," Fräulein Elinor was saying, "any kind of bond is irksome. All I want to do is to live my life. . . ." Again she made the S-like curve in the air which Stumpy had wondered at earlier in their interview and which Fräulein Elinor had described with her hand when she had uttered much the same words before. "But just when one imagines it is one's own to hold and to experience, it slips through the fingers and is gone. Life in all its gloriousness, in its entirety, is lacking. Its colours have no lustre. . . . Won't you have another cocktail? But you have hardly touched your glass. Do drink it up, there's a dear. Yes, you are a dear; I'm already very fond of you; you're a sweet little thing. If only you were willing to lend yourself to it, we might pass many a jolly hour together. Let's drink to it!"

"But I shall soon be leaving Germany," stammered Stumpy, her heart sinking, she knew not why, at her hostess' suggestion.

"A pity! Still, until you sail we'll make the most of our opportunities, and get to know each other, and

like each other. Or, rather, you shall get to be fond of me, for, as I've said already, I am very fond of you."

Stumpy had risen, and was getting ready to depart. But Fräulein Elinor seemed determined to keep her a while longer.

"You must not go yet," she cried, seizing Stumpy's hand. "Anyway not before we've fixed up a meeting for the four of us. What about to-morrow evening?"

"I shall have to talk it over with Herr Ger—, I mean, with my fiancé."

Fräulein Elinor Schmitz raised her head from among the cushions, and said in a tone of grandmotherly admonition:

"My dear child, learn by my experience: never ask any one else's opinion; always act on your own initiative. Once you have decided, the other is invariably forced to adopt a defensive attitude. If he prove unwilling, you have every right to be offended. Success in life does not depend on being kind, but upon being offended and put out at the appropriate moment. It is a powerful educational weapon which one must never allow to slip from one's hand. Inwardly, one must always be mistress of oneself. One may be permitted the wish to take him by the scruff of the neck and cry: 'You idiot!' But I would not advise you to so drastic a step, especially in a moment of excitement. What time are you likely to be free to-morrow evening? Seven?"

Stumpy nodded.

"Very well. Come and fetch me. Herr von Nadolny will be here, I'll see to that this very day. Then we'll go off on a jaunt together, trailing our worthy bridegrooms in our wake!"

So saying, she drew herself up and slid from the

couch, took Stumpy's head between her hands, and kissed her on the two cheeks and the lips.

Stumpy had the same feeling of horror, only magnified a hundredfold, as she invariably had when it was a question of eating chocolates.

She ran from the room as if a pack of hell-hounds were at her heels. And as she ran she kept on repeating to herself:

"Poor boy! Poor boy! Poor boy!"

Chapter Eighteen

DR. SHADOW HAS A RELAPSE

THAT same evening Stumpy went out as usual with Herr Gerberding. She had meant to say never a word about Fräulein Elinor Schmitz's suggestion for a meeting of the four of them, so greatly had the young lady in question aroused feelings of repulsion in her breast.

Then it occurred to her that it was hardly kind to leave Fritz to the tender mercies of a dame who had openly declared she was merely using him as a pawn. So long as she was still living in Germany, Stumpy felt it her duty to bring him what help and counsel she could, and thus prepare the way to being a real friend to him in the future. She therefore took the bull by the horns, and said:

"Do you know, Theodore"—yes, he was "Theodore" to her now, even "dear Theodore" at times, though to herself she invariably referred to him as "Herr Gerberding"—"I've just made such an interesting acquaintance. She is a rich and fashionable young lady who is engaged to an old friend of mine, and she would dearly like us to make up a foursome party and go out together."

"Why, of course, we could fall in with her plan, very pleasant indeed," answered Herr Gerberding, obviously delighted.

"How would to-morrow evening suit you?"

"Why should to-morrow evening not suit me?"

"And just think! She is, indirectly, an acquaintance

of yours as well; for she is a daughter of the house of Schmitz in Soest where you have stayed. When I told her about your recent visit she seemed awfully pleased, and she looks forward to having a good pow-wow with you about her people—though she seems to be at odds with them just now. So you two will have contacts from the outset."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Theodore, but now he seemed far from pleased. Quite the contrary! After reflecting a while in morose silence, he resumed: "I say, Annemiechen, I don't think your plan will work. To-morrow evening I am expecting a most important letter which I may have to answer by return. So I can't bind myself beforehand."

"All right. Then I'll write and put her off. Sunday or Monday will probably suit her just as well."

"As you like," he answered, though he still appeared to be rather put out about something. He cleared his throat and resumed: "To be quite frank, I'm not so greatly taken with the plan. A quartette party always creates a feeling of constraint. Suppose one or other of the group does not fit in? Besides, I am ever so much happier when alone with you. Up to now we've never had any one, not even your relations, to disturb our tête-à-tête. Why should we change now?"

"You seemed so keen on the idea at first, and then, all of a sudden, you are completely off it."

"Well, you see, I've had time to think it over, and, on reflection, the scheme does not appeal to me," said Theodore, making a grimace like a cat when a thunderclap rends the air.

"Something wrong," thought Stumpy, but it was not until later as she lay in bed passing the events of the day in review that it began to dawn on her what the difficulty actually was: "He has been pulling my

leg about all his grand acquaintances! He does not know any of them, neither the Krupps at H $\ddot{u}$ gel, nor the Jansens in Krefeld, nor the Schmitzes in Soest. He's a cheat!"

If he had deceived her in this, it was more than probable that all the rest was a lie,—about the two cars, the numerous assistants, and the fabulous wealth. In that case, his putting up at the "Adlon" was pure swank. He was nothing but an impostor, one of those common swindlers one reads so much about in the papers and in certain kinds of novels. If her surmise was true, then poor little Stumpy was heading for disaster. She had better follow Fräulein Elinor's advice, and consult a private-enquiry office, cost what it might.

But an inner voice seemed to counsel her to desist. "Don't do anything of the sort. If you do, you'll be beholden to her, and one must never allow oneself to be beholden to one's enemies. You must keep free of her, if you hope to get even with her."

"Very well, then," said Stumpy to herself. But at that instant a plan, a "devilish plan," she called it, entered her head. "If one is fighting against a female demon what other weapons has one?"

Next morning she said to Gudrun as they were dressing:

"I say, you know that man Nietzsche, the celebrated philosopher; do you remember just what it was he wrote about woman and a whip?"

"Of course I do," answered Gudrun. "'When visiting woman, forget not thy whip'. What an ass! That's the passage you meant, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the one. Be an angel, and write it down."

"Why don't you write it yourself?"

"No, I'd rather not. If you write it, I shall be quite sure it is correct."

Gudrun, usually so alert, fell easily into the trap, and did what the younger girl had asked her.

"There. I'm not sure if it is word for word as he wrote it," she said, laboriously inscribing the text on the blank page of one of her love letters.

Armed with this treasure, Stumpy made her way to a big store where she bought a riding-whip. It made a lovely swishing noise when she tried it, and the lash had some fine knots tied in all its length. She told the salesman to send it to Herr Fritz von Nadolny, and to be so kind as to enclose a little note. Offering the man a sealed envelope, she dictated the address, saying she could not write it herself because she had sprained her wrist.

So far so good. Fritz had been warned. She, however, could now hold aloof from the game. 'Nuff said!

That day she was unable to make time to go and see him. Next day was Sunday. No work! Stumpy flew like an arrow to his attic, hardly even waiting to eat lunch, so eager was she to see him.

She found him poring over his books. His eyes were dim with fatigue, and he looked decidedly worried.

"I had so counted on seeing you yesterday evening that when you did not turn up I felt absolutely rotten."

"And what about me?" As she spoke, her eyes travelled round the room in search of the riding-whip. But it was nowhere to be seen.

He was eager to know how the visit to Fräulein Elinor had gone off, and the sort of impression Stumpy had carried away with her.

"What did she say about me?" asked Stumpy cautiously.

"She said you were a perfect dear, and that she would love to know you better—and a lot of other nice things. I had not the courage to press her further. Besides my heart ached. . . ."

"Me too! And so I can only tell you that she treated me very kindly, spoke very nicely about you, and I hope you'll be very happy with her. . . ."

She thought: "That will certainly put him off the scent as to who sent him the whip!"

She was convinced that he would refer to the matter sooner or later. But not a word about any parcel ever passed his lips. He must be feeling ashamed that an outsider should know of his humiliating position.

Thus they drifted apart, and the secret rose up like a huge wall cutting them off from one another.

And yet, come to think of it, what signified this secret when compared with that other—a really big one—which Stumpy had hoped to ignore but which seemed to become a greater menace to her happiness day by day? The secret between herself and her fascinating employer, Dr. Shadow. . . .

She could not help feeling that ever since she had told the dentist of her engagement he had taken a deeper interest in her. The light kiss he was wont to place on her forehead or cheek when she came in the morning and went away in the evening had of late been more lingering, and from day to day came nearer her lips even though she turned her face aside to avoid it. As he approached his goal, a shudder went through her frame. Sometimes, even in the presence of his patients, he would let his eyes dwell upon her in so obvious a caress that she went hot and cold with anxiety.

It became clearer and clearer to her that she would be an easy victim so far as he was concerned if ever he should give his desires rein once more. Long ago, she had abandoned the idea of using the hatpin upon him in her defence. Such a weapon was foolish, and smacked of childhood's days—and yet, how was she to devise another as efficient and more suitable?

Perhaps the best would be to send word that she was ill and was not coming again. But, then, how could she explain matters at home? Had she not said she was under contract to remain till October? Besides, she needed her salary more than ever now. Those snake-skin shoes, alone, had swallowed fifty-eight marks. She needed to earn good money to indulge her liking for such smart wear.

But fate did not give her time to choose a course of action.

The day's work was over. The surgical instruments all lay in a bath of lysoform. Nothing was left to do but to dry them and put them away.

Johnny had been sent off some time ago, and now Dr. Shadow made as if to go in his turn.

All at once he stopped as he was about to cross the threshold of the consulting room, and exclaimed:

"Hullo! I've mislaid my cigarette case. Could you have a look round for it?"

There it lay, conspicuously, on his smoking table. Stumpy picked it up, and handed it to him. But he seized her by the wrist and would not let go his hold. She begged and prayed, but his advances became more and more urgent. What was she to do? She struck out at him, and the stud which held his collar broke, sending the collar flying. His hat followed suit. She struggled with him desperately. When would help come?

"Fritz, O, Fritz, do come," she cried, hardly realising what she was saying.

"Your Fritz will get you all in good time," Dr. Shadow laughed back, evidently thinking that she was calling on her fiancé.

Then, quite suddenly, she remembered that Herr Bach, the old craftsman, would be still at work in his den. For a moment her assailant's hold slackened; she tore herself away, rushed to the door leading into the corridor, and made straight for the little room at the back, Dr. Shadow hot in pursuit. At last the saving handle was in her grasp. She turned it and stumbled upon her saviour.

"Herr Bach, dear Herr Bach!"

"My poor child! Poor little girl!" she heard a friendly voice saying, and the words sounded angelic in her ears. Then:

"There, there! I've seen it coming for such a long time, or, rather, I fancied it had already happened a good while back, just as with the others. Now, you just stay quietly here. I'll go and get your things, and then I'll let you out the back way."

Stumpy was so frightened that she cowered in a corner trembling in every limb. Even when she was safely in the street her concern lest the doctor should be following kept her in a state of nervous agitation.

She had previously agreed to drop in on Fritz, for there was a whole free hour before Herr Gerberding would be calling to take her out.

The voice of caution whispered: "Don't go just now." But her longing to see her lover was so intense, her feeling that in his arms she would find comfort and would be cleansed from this recent contamination was so convincing, that she took the road of least resistance and climbed the five flights of stairs.

No sooner had she closed the door behind her, however, than he asked.

"My dear, what on earth's the matter?"

"What should be the matter? I'm all right," she said, trying to be natural, and to turn away his curiosity with a smile.

But he was not going to let her fob him off so easily. Leading her to his bed, he said:

"Lie down and rest a little. I'll sit quietly at the foot of the bed and not say a word until you are yourself again."

So entirely did she feel that his comforting strength was folding her about, it never occurred to her to protest. She simply and passively obeyed him.

As she lay stretched on her back, her knees and feet closely touching one another, it seemed to her that she was in her grave and that he was sitting on the mound above, looking down at her through the earth and the coffin-lid. She closed her eyes, and made as if she slept. But her mind was still in a turmoil, and she was more keenly aware than ever of the stir of her senses. A voice seemed to be shouting in her ear:

"This is the moment when you must tell him what sort of a thing you really are, that he may at length cease to have so much respect for you. As soon as he knows you have nothing to lose, he will hug you to his heart, and you will both be perfectly happy until the day comes when, as Frau Gerberding, you set sail for America."

If only she could know how best to approach the topic! Confession was so difficult. Indeed as she peeped at him through half-closed lids she said to herself: "Impossible! I just can't tell him."

And yet she knew that she must, this very day, here and now, otherwise she'd never have the pluck. Her

breath came in short, sharp gasps as she lay trying to make up her mind. At length Fritz leaned over her and said very softly:

"I'm afraid my recipe wasn't the right one. You are not quieting down at all. Far from it. You seem to be getting more and more excited. Best tell me what's up. It must be something pretty bad to agitate you to such a pitch."

"You never said a truer word, Fritz."

"Well, trust me. You know as well as I do that if you can trust any one on this earth it is me."

"No, no," she muttered between her teeth. "You are the very last person I want to confide in so far as this particular thing is concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"That I . . . that you . . ."

Stumpy held her breath. How was she to tell him?

"Open your eyes, darling. Look me in the face. You'll have confidence then to tell me about everything that is troubling you."

She shook her head vigorously.

"If once I look at you squarely I'll never have the courage," she murmured in desperation.

Then, quite unexpectedly, she felt her will stiffen, the kind of will-power that gives you strength to jump into the river to end your misery—or to throw vitriol into Fräulein Elinor Schmitz's face!

She opened her eyes, and said energetically:

"Here's the whole thing in a nutshell." As she spoke, Stumpy was amazed to find calm returning to her. "If you think I am the same girl you met eighteen months ago by the street-car you are very much mistaken. I am no longer the young innocent I was at that time. Far from it. There, now you know."

In horror at what he guessed to be her meaning and

yet refusing still to believe, Fritz's face had become very serious and very pale.

"Do you mean that . . ." he stammered, with bowed head and stricken mien.

"Yes, I do mean."

His hands shot out towards her, and the fingers dug deep into the flesh around her shoulders.

"Now he's going to strike me," thought Stumpy.

But he did not give her a blow. She felt almost disappointed that he refrained. For had he given her a good beating, then she knew she would have been wholly his.

"Get up," he commanded, "and tell me all about it."

She swung her feet to the ground, avoiding all contact with him.

"Nothing much to tell," she said with a forced laugh.

"Who was it?"

"Who should it be? The dentist man."

"Your employer?"

"Who else?"

"And what were you so upset about to-day?"

"Because he seemed to think he could start it all over again. But I've some one to protect me now. You, Fritz. Dear, darling Fritz, do have pity on me. Don't thrust me quite away from you. Good or bad, take me as I am. What does it matter? It's all over and done with, a thing of the past. You had not properly come on the scene when it happened. And besides. . . . Oh, I do love you so! I love you! I love you!"

She bowed her head on his knees and clung to him, throwing her arms around his waist. For long she lay thus, weeping.

"Beast," said Fritz after a long pause, gritting his teeth. "Cad!"

Stumpy felt his dear hands stroking her hair. At first she fancied she must be deceiving herself. This was far too lovely a thing to happen. But the caress continued, and only ceased when, from time to time, his hand reached her neck. Then it resumed its soothing movement from front to back.

"Oh, now the worst is over, now he'll be good and kind again," thought Stumpy, her heart dancing with relief and joy.

Well, since he was taking it so nicely, she might venture a caress in her turn. She lifted her arms to his neck, and at the same time raised eager lips to his.

But her lips sought his in vain. She opened her eyes, and found he had turned his head aside in order to avoid kissing her—just as she had done when trying to avoid Dr. Shadow.

Then she realised that he was far from feeling kindly disposed towards her: or if, indeed, his heart was still hers, it was so in some strangely different way than she had imagined.

"Fritz, oh, my dear, dear, dear Fritz," she cried beseechingly.

"Come," he said, "come, my sweetheart. We can't remain sitting on my bed."

"But you brought me here yourself."

"Yes, but then everything was different."

She did not dare to ask why. He led her into his sitting-room, and obediently she took her usual place beside him on the antique sofa.

All the time he never turned his eyes away from her face—and such sad, compassionate eyes! She felt herself blushing with shame under their steady gaze.

"Now, listen, my darling," he began. "A terrible sin has been committed against you, and I must see to it that no further sin is committed against you by myself. You are on the high road to disaster, and I must not do anything which may thrust you deeper into the abyss. If I did, I should be as mean and worthless a cad as Shadow."

"What do you mean? I shall be Frau Gerberding in less than two months."

"I dare say. But your conscience must be quite clear when you become Frau Gerberding."

"My dear boy, don't worry yourself about that! I haven't any conscience left! A disaster perhaps, but nothing I can do will make it better. Besides if we are to start worrying about my conscience it is already too late—I should never have come to your attic from the outset!"

"Unfortunately you are only too right. I should never have allowed it. But I love you so much, and I was so determined never to take liberties. . . . So I thought it would be all right, and no harm come of our meetings."

"Why are you saying such funny things? Do you want to be rid of me? Do you wish to thrust me out of your life because you don't consider me good enough for you any longer?"

"Leave you in the lurch? And just now? Stumpy, how could you think such a thing of me! I need you more than ever these few poor weeks that remain to us. My whole future happiness depends on . . . But I must not think only of myself. You, too, need me. I'm not so sure but what you need me now more than ever before."

"I don't care what happens, so long as I can see you. You are quite right, I need you—I need you—

so much, that . . . But you seem to have changed towards me. I am frightened of you. . . .”

“Stumpy! You frightened of me? Why, I am fonder of you than ever I was. But, you see, my responsibility has increased with what you’ve told me.”

She thought: “Nonsense!” She longed to sit on his knee and suffocate him with kisses. Lack of courage alone held her in check. He might really have despised her for such a demonstration. Might have taken her for a common wench. Then, indeed, she would have been hopelessly lost.

She stayed quietly in her place, and made no effort to get nearer to him, not even to stroke his hand as it lay on the table. Long ago the room had been buried in shadows. Suddenly she remembered her rendezvous with Herr Gerberding. He must be waiting for her at home this long while now, listening for her return.

“Oh, I must be going,” she cried, her voice strained with hopeless resignation.

He got up to allow her to pass.

“Fritz,” she pleaded.

He bowed his head towards her and, for the first time in all these weeks, kissed her on the forehead.

A kiss of compassion, nothing more. Thus might some poor criminal have been kissed before mounting the scaffold! Oh, it was worse, far worse, than if he had not kissed her at all!

She thrust him back from her with both hands and hurried from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter Nineteen

STUMPY PLAYS THE GOOD SAMARITAN

It was not until next morning when Gudrun roused her from a deep sleep that Stumpy fully realised the complexities of the situation.

She felt she simply could not go back to work and face Dr. Shadow once more. And yet how was she to explain her sudden decision to stay at home, when all along she had been so emphatic that on no account could she leave her job until the first of October? Her people knew she had contracted to stay out her time, and if ever she took it into her head to tell them the truth there'd be no end of a fuss, and things might very well turn to her disadvantage.

Her first impulse was to pretend she had a headache, and she made as if to stay in bed.

But Gudrun was not to be taken in by such devices.

"There's something behind all this," she said. "Tell me what's up, and I'll see if I can help you out of your hole!"

"We've fallen out," admitted Stumpy. "I'm not going to Dr. Shadow's any more."

"But how are you going to explain matters to Mamma and Papa? They'll want to know the reason why. Have you concocted any plausible excuse?"

"No, I've not thought out anything yet. I don't even know how long my headache had better last!"

"Well, meanwhile, I'll place a compress on your fevered brow, and you must set your fertile imagination to work."

Gudrun had not time to put her suggestion into execution before there was a tap at the door, and Lina appeared.

"There's a nigger come with a note for Miss Stumpy," she said, a vague sound of anxiety in her voice.

The handwriting on the envelope was, of course, Dr. Shadow's. Stumpy read:

MY DEAR FRÄULEIN LÜDICKE:

I feel impelled to write in order that you know how sincerely sorry I am at what occurred yesterday. Please overlook the matter, and come to your work as usual. I promise that nothing of the sort will happen again, so long as you are acting as my assistant.

With the utmost respect,

I subscribe myself

your devoted wellwisher,

GILBERT A. SHADOW.

Without a word, Stumpy handed the missive to Gudrun. The latter read it, and pondered a while. Then she said:

"So far so good. It's a blessing we did not bring Mamma and Papa into the business. I do hate questions and explanations! You'd better get up as quickly as possible, and go off to your job. One thing is certain, he'll not molest you again."

Gudrun's advice seemed eminently reasonable to the younger girl; and when, three-quarters of an hour later, she stepped into Dr. Shadow's consulting room, the dentist was so busy attending to his first patient, that he merely said over his shoulder:

"Please mix me some plaster, Fräulein Lüdicke."

That same evening, when the day's work was done, he shook hands with her, saying genially:

"Good-bye. See you to-morrow!"

Stumpy felt that her difficulties were smoothing out nicely, if only she were not so alarmed as to what Fritz's attitude might be. She was half inclined not to go up to see him, so little hope had she that he would welcome her in his usual friendly way. But, in the end, she went.

He was seated at his writing-table when she entered the sitting-room. And yet the sheet of paper before him was blank, so he had not been working at all. His books, too, were unopened.

"Fritz, dear Fritz!"

"Yes, little girlie, yes."

That was all. She snuggled up to him, but he had a moment of hesitation before he put his arm round her waist. He looked as if he had not slept last night; his brow was furrowed, his face pale.

"You're not well, Fritz."

"On the contrary, I am very well."

"Fritz, do you love me?"

"How could I not love you, little Stumpy?"

"Then give me a kiss."

His mouth was on hers, but his lips were hard and unyielding. A wooden statue could not have given a less human salute. Even Herr Gerberding's kisses were kindlier than this!

Stumpy sank to her knees.

"Fritz, dear Fritz!"

She pressed against him, and he responded to her ardour with gentle warmth. Ah, if only he would not look at her so compassionately, so searchingly, so wonderingly—as if she were a corpse fished from a watery grave or a three-legged hen!

"Get up," he said at last, placing his hands under her arms to help her to her feet. "You don't need to play the part of a repentant Magdalen."

Such an idea had never entered Stumpy's head, and, yet as Fritz spoke the words, she had to admit to herself that in certain respects they filled the bill rather well. A flush of shame mounted to her cheeks. Surely she was not so old-fashioned as to look upon herself as a sinner because of what had happened? The only thing she wanted was that Fritz should love her as he had always loved her. Or, rather, she wanted a new kind of love from him. Nothing else mattered.

Instead of this, it seemed to her that the gulf between them was widening.

Next time she visited him, she came late. Dr. Shadow had had a busy day, and she had hurried to rejoin her Fritz, had run most of the way, so that little beads of perspiration had formed on her forehead. She was telling him quite simply about her day, when she noticed a growing look of surprise in his face.

"You don't mean to say you are still working for him?" he asked, in genuine horror.

"Why of course! Didn't you know?"

And as she asked the question she realised that he could not possibly have known. They had carefully avoided discussing the unwelcome topic; and, although she herself could never get it out of her head, she had kept good watch over her tongue, so that Dr. Shadow's name and his relationship to her had not again been mentioned.

"I had taken it for granted that ten horses would not have dragged you to that house once more. And now I find that you are going regularly every day."

Stumpy searched her vanity-bag until she found the note Dr. Shadow had written. She handed it to Fritz without saying a word. He took it gingerly between

his fingers as if it were a red-hot piece of metal, and, having read it, promptly handed it back to her.

"All very well," he said, shaking his head. "Still, I can't understand how you could do it."

"What is there to understand?" she asked, bridling. "He ate humble-pie and asked me to forgive him. I really cannot see what there was to be afraid of any more."

Fritz buried his face in his hands, crying:

"I don't understand. I don't understand."

Nor could she bring him to a better frame of mind before taking leave. No matter what they did or what they talked about, misunderstanding remained like a nightmare oppressing their spirits.

Then something happened which brought misery and sorrow into Stumpy's young life.

Next morning Dr. Shadow was fitting a denture to an elderly dame—a lady somewhere between forty and sixty, thought Stumpy—who would fain have passed for a young woman still, when Johnny entered with a visiting card on a tray. Stumpy glanced down at the name, and read:

ELINOR SCHMITZ

Soest.

Her heart stood still for a moment.

"You'd better go and see what she wants," said Dr. Shadow. "And tell her she'll have to wait her turn since she's come without an appointment."

Stumpy found Fräulein Elinor standing in the hall. She was wearing a silver toque, and a costly chinchilla fur cloak which entirely enveloped her slender body although the weather was still very warm. As she stood motionless there in the half-light, she looked

like an idol, Stumpy thought. Then her fluty voice reached Stumpy's ears:

"Dear, dear little Fräulein Lüdicke, so here you are at last. I've come on your recommendation, you know. Now I feel I am in a safe harbour. You'll see to it that he does not keep me waiting an awful age!"

"I'll do my best," said Stumpy, opening the door of the waiting-room and showing the patient in. Two other ladies were already there.

When Stumpy got back to the parlour, Dr. Shadow, as was his custom where new patients were concerned, asked softly in English:

"What class?"

"First class," answered Stumpy in a whisper.

He nodded, well pleased; and, since the newcomer was "first class," he saw to it that she was not kept waiting.

Fräulein Elinor Schmitz rustled into the holy of holies. The young lady was so high and mighty in her demeanour that poor little Stumpy wondered how ever she had had courage to go and call upon her that day not so very long ago. Even the dentist, used as he was to such apparitions, was momentarily non-plussed.

Then, as if he had oiled his machinery afresh, the proper reactions set in, and he became his fascinating self once more. All his little mannerisms were again to the fore, and he lisped and simpered as he invariably did when dealing with the fair sex. Stumpy knew his tricks and wiles by heart now, but he had never appeared so repulsive as he did to-day.

Fräulein Elinor Schmitz, however, seemed favourably impressed, and reciprocated with a display of feminine arts. As she installed herself in the operating chair she made good use of her eyes, and preened

her feathers, as it were, to the limits of what was permissible, though never quite overstepping the bounds of propriety. Stumpy, who looked on at these manœuvres with Fritz's censorious eyes, felt that she was taking the lady in the act of a contemplated adultery.

"Poor Fritz," she muttered, "poor boy!" And as the name sped thus through her mind, she felt all her recent soreness of heart evaporate.

From time to time Fräulein Elinor cast a twinkling glance in Stumpy's direction, as if to convey a volume of secret understanding.

The dentist seemed to have a great deal of work to do on Fräulein Elinor's mouth, but at last he let her go after giving her an appointment for the morrow. The young lady took a demurely majestic farewell of Stumpy, who reciprocated with an appropriate little curtsy, half mocking, half in fun.

How she longed to drop in on Fritz and tell him of this fresh experience! But she knew he would be busy in the laboratory. Besides, yearn as she might for his company, she dreaded to encounter that commiserative and astonished look of his.

Next day, at the same hour, Fräulein Elinor once more appeared upon the scene, and the game of yesterday was resumed.

Then the dentist said with a frown of puzzled concern:

"I think we must take an X-ray of this."

Stumpy was horrified. "What will happen now?" she asked herself.

"Allow me," he was saying, "to show you the way." And therewith he opened the door leading to the back room.

Fräulein Elinor followed him, a smile curling her thin lips.

"It will last an eternity to-day," thought Stumpy, cleaning up the instruments her employer had just been using. "Above all, Fritz must never learn of what is happening, he must never know what goes on in the X-ray room. If he should find that out, my own experience with this man would appear to him all the more horrible."

Yet, what was her surprise, hardly three minutes had passed before Fräulein Elinor reappeared upon the threshold! Her lips were pressed severely together, and she glanced round haughtily in search of her furs.

Dr. Shadow followed close upon her heels. He was flushed, and was frowning angrily.

Fräulein Elinor did not exactly seem to be angry, but she moved in a cloud of imperturbability.

Stumpy hastened to assist her into her cloak, while the lady herself, turning serenely towards Dr. Shadow, said:

"If the X-ray is really necessary, I'll come again to-morrow. Same time?"

The dentist merely bowed his head, while the patient swept majestically from the room.

He stood gnawing his lips for a moment, muttering to himself as he looked out of the window. Stumpy fancied she could hear the word "canaille," but, before she was quite sure, he said peremptorily:

"Next patient, please!"

Stumpy had made a date with Fritz for that same evening, but she had not the heart to keep the appointment. She excused herself to herself by saying:

"He's often kept me waiting; let him see what it's like to kick his heels for a change!"

And almost before she realised it, next morning was there.

Johnny had already announced Fräulein Elinor Schmitz's arrival, and Stumpy opened the door of the waiting-room to ask her up, when, whom should she see sitting in the young lady's company, but Fritz himself, her Fritz, occupying the chair next his fiancée. Stumpy's summons of "Fräulein Schmitz" was barely audible.

Elinor was another person to-day. She was cool, collected, unapproachable. But Dr. Shadow was a match for her. He rose to the occasion, adjusting the operating chair with calm decorum, and, while Stumpy slipped the clean napkin under the patient's chin, he said:

"I'll just see first of all whether an X-ray is absolutely necessary. If so. . . ."

"If so," Fräulein Elinor interrupted, "I have brought an escort. I don't suppose you will have any objection to this gentleman accompanying me into your X-ray room?"

"Of course not," said Dr. Shadow with a courtly bow, as he took up the mouth-mirror.

Stumpy noticed that his hand was trembling. But she herself was trembling in every limb, for Fritz's eyes were hard and boded no good. Suddenly he burst out, staring Dr. Shadow squarely in the eyes:

"So, that's the kind of cad you are! How dare you lay hands on my fiancée? How dare you decoy her into a darkened room, and there molest her? Do you not realise that you are guilty of a gross breach of faith? Don't you realise that I could start a suit against you in law? But I shan't do that. I've got other ways of dealing with a cur like you. . . . No you don't!" Fritz interrupted his tirade, and sprang to-

wards the dentist intercepting the latter who was about to touch the bell. "You fancy your nigger can chuck me out? Well, you are very much mistaken. I'm not going to let you off so lightly, my worthy friend."

He stood aggressively facing Dr. Shadow, who looked to right and to left seeking a way out of his predicament.

Stumpy was paralysed with horror at such a scene. She felt obscurely that Fritz's anger was not only raging on account of the affront offered to his future bride, but that he was using this opportunity to exact retribution for the crime Dr. Shadow had committed against herself in the past. Oh, what would happen if Fritz so far forgot himself as to betray her secret?

Meanwhile Dr. Shadow had taken refuge behind a round, gilded table. He took a little bronze statuette that stood there and held it in his hand as if he meant to use it as a weapon in case of need. Stumpy impulsively sprang between the two men. Of course she should not have made such a move, for it placed her directly in the line of fire should hostilities break out.

"What do you want?" asked Dr. Shadow, querulously, from behind his barricade.

"You'll learn that soon enough," cried Fritz. "So far as my fiancée is concerned, she is quite capable of taking care of herself without any assistance from me. But this child here, she can't protect herself, she is absolutely defenceless. You took advantage of her immaturity and her dependent position to seduce her. That's a heavy burden for your conscience, Sir. You will have to reckon with me, Sir, for what you've done, d'you hear?"

"Things are getting quite interesting," a piping voice announced from the background.

Fräulein Elinor Schmitz had risen from the operat-

ing chair and was standing with her chinchilla fur about her, a mocking smile twisting her lips.

At the sight of her, Stumpy's anger blazed. Everything she had suffered at Shadow's hands rose up before her eyes, and smote her with renewed anguish. And now, added to all this misery, she was to be humiliated before the woman she hated more than anyone in the world. Another girl might be able to bear such a martyrdom with equanimity. Not Stumpy!

Summoning all her courage, she said addressing Fritz with ostensible calm:

"Please do not worry yourself on my behalf. For what I do, I am alone responsible. I do not need any one to come to my rescue. I am a modern girl. I can do with my body what I will, just like a man. And if it pleases me to give myself to some one, I am not for that reason 'seduced,' I assure you. That's a very out-of-date way of looking at things. I would beg you, therefore, to mind your own business."

There! Now he had it straight! Gudrun could not have expressed herself better. Henceforward, perhaps, he'd stop despising her.

But what was he doing?

His face went ashen; he seemed petrified with horror. Only his glance leapt from her to the doctor and back again with a maniacal gleam.

Then the strange light was quenched, and he was himself again. His hand sought something that lay hidden beneath his overcoat, and he brought forth a riding-whip—the very same riding-whip Stumpy had purchased not so long ago for eight marks fifty.

"So that's what you've made of her, you cad," he cried, cracking the whip round Dr. Shadow's ears.

At first, completely taken by surprise, the dentist ducked to avoid the lash. Then, raising the bronze

statuette and taking careful aim, he made to hurl it at Fritz. But the thing proved too heavy for his strength. It slipped from his fingers and crashed through the glass of the table, splintering it in all directions. Now Fritz got home with several shrewd cuts of his whip.

"Come," she then heard him saying to Elinor, "we'd better be going."

Overwhelmed with grief, Stumpy hid her face in her hands, and, when she again looked up, she found she was alone with Dr. Shadow.

What was going to happen now?

He was gingerly feeling his throat and ears.

"Just go and see whether the double doors are shut, will you?"

He spoke very gently, his voice caressive, as it had not been since their recent reconciliation.

"Fräulein Schmitz was the last patient this side of lunch," Stumpy informed him. But, to make quite sure, she crossed the passage and peeped into the waiting-room. It was empty. The hall, over which Johnny presided, was too far away for the negro to have heard Fritz's voice even when it had been raised in anger. No fear of gossiping tongues spreading the tale of this unseemly fracas.

"Thank goodness for that!" sighed Dr. Shadow. "Now please look me over and see if I am presentable enough to go among my fellow-mortals."

Two angry weals had risen up where the lash had fallen. They travelled round his throat, beneath the ears, and upwards across the back of his neck till they were lost among his hair.

"Hardly 'presentable' for a day or two," answered Stumpy sadly.

Dr. Shadow stepped over to the mirror. He craned

his head this way and that, examining the damage. Then he asked gloomily:

"What's the best remedy, do you think?"

Stumpy thought to herself, her maternal instinct roused into activity: "He is no longer my 'fascinating dentist,' poor man!" Then a bright idea occurred to her, and she said:

"When I had mumps, they wrapped my throat and neck up to my chin. I could do the same for you. But for the moment, and before your afternoon patients begin to arrive, we must put on cold astringent compresses. We've got some alum here."

And as she was still speaking, she made for the medicine cupboard. Ministering to his needs with deft fingers she listened to his grateful thanks.

"First of all you chivalrously come to my rescue. . . ."—yes, he had really used the word "chivalrously," she had not misheard him!—"then you tend me with the devotion of a Sister of Charity. How ever shall I get on without you after October the first?"

Stumpy took heart to say:

"But, Dr. Shadow, you surely don't expect me to stay in your employment after what has happened to-day? You'll have to do without me from to-day on."

Her patient completely collapsed at this.

"You are right. I suppose you are right, though it seems hard luck," he said plaintively. "But how shall I be able to get on with my work if you leave me at such short notice?"

Stumpy's innate helpfulness once again rose to the occasion.

"I tell you what," she said. "As soon as the last of your patients is gone to-day, I'll slip round to the employment agency and see if I can't select a suitable assistant."

She looked radiantly at him, hope shining in her eyes.

"Would you really do that?"

"Why, of course. Now the first thing you've got to do is to have something to eat. I'll tell Johnny to ask Herbert to drive back and fetch you a nice lunch."

"And something for you, too," insisted Dr. Shadow.

She nodded, and went off to find Johnny and give him instructions.

Then she returned and changed the compress, extremely gratified to find the weals far less fiery already. Dr. Shadow gazed up at her with lamb-like confidence.

When luncheon came he even suffered her to feed him, for his jaw was swelled and painful. Of course he could have used his own hands for the purpose, for they had escaped injury. But she seemed to enjoy ministering to him; and he, nothing loath, yielded to the pleasant sensation.

At two o'clock his patients began to arrive. Having thoroughly washed away the traces of alum, Stumpy wrapped a soft linen cloth around his neck and covered the whole with a black-silk kerchief. "He looks exactly like the Polish poet Puschke," Stumpy thought, as she contemplated her work. She had learned about this great man from a synopsis of his amazing life and tragic death given on the program of an opera for which Gudrun had once given her tickets. "Eugen," that was the name . . . Dr. Shadow's appearance seemed to her twice as interesting as usual, and the look of pain in his eyes bewitched all those who came that afternoon under his care. But to-day he was indifferent as to what impression he created, being anxious merely to get through his work with expedition. So far as he was concerned, feminine charm had completely vanished from the world.

Some of the patients made no effort to hide their

disappointment at such an unwonted display of indifference, and Stumpy was tempted to give him a hint that he had better assume a more amiable demeanour lest the affronted fair ones should not return to him for dental treatment. But when it came to the point, she felt she could not. Besides she had no further interest in Dr. Shadow and his affairs.

Ah, now, after what seemed an eternity, the last patient had left, and Stumpy was free.

"I'll go straight along to the bureau," said she.

But Dr. Shadow felt he could not bear to be separated from her, even for half an hour.

"It will be closed by now," he said. "Please stay a little longer. This may be the last time we shall ever see one another."

Even Stumpy felt regret at the imminent separation.

"My deary, my little sweetheart," he murmured, stroking her hand as she rearranged the compress round his neck.

She made no effort to avoid the contact. He no longer alarmed her, and when she took her place by his side she passively allowed him to play with her fingers.

"That reminds me," he suddenly exclaimed, "I must not forget to settle up with you for your month." So saying, he took out his wallet, counted the notes, and handed a small wad of them over to her.

"No, no," she protested, "that's too much!"

"Just take it, please," he said with a lordly air as though it mattered little to his pocket if he chose to give her a small fortune.

"No, no," she repeated, "you will be paying me quite handsomely enough if you settle up for the whole month. I don't want any present from you."

The duel of wills continued for a while, fluctuating

this way and that. Then, with a sigh of resignation, he put the rejected notes back into his pocket-book.

The evening was drawing in. Already the long shadows were filling the room with gloom, so that she could see only a dim outline of him, and his voice reached her strangely through the twilit spaces.

"Well, well, business is business, and I suppose it will remain so till the end of time. I've been a fool to make myself so cheap where women were concerned. Women! You yourself are a woman, my darling, though you are only sixteen. Your tender years should have made you safe from me—and yet it was your youth that made you so specially attractive. 'Attractive,' that's not the right word. Ah, if only I had given myself the trouble to love you honestly and make you love me in turn! Why, I should have been the wealthiest of men and the happiest of mortals. For do you know you are the most poetical, the most practical, the most feminine little creature it is possible to imagine? I might have had the best and dearest of friends, such as is rarely to be encountered in this world. Instead of that, I just treated you as one among many, and toyed with any piece of femininity which happened to cross my range of vision. I dare not think of all you must have suffered. I ought to kneel before you and beg for your forgiveness. What lovely times you and I might have had together. One can hardly picture how glorious, indeed. And I've muffed it all!"

Stumpy thought she was in duty bound to console him now that he was so downhearted, so she said:

"Well, don't worry too much over might-have-beens, Dr. Shadow. As soon as ever my friend appeared upon the scene, your and my little idyll would have ceased."

"What friend? The man you are engaged to? Or that other one who came here to-day?"

Stumpy hardly heeded the question, and made no attempt to explain, for as he asked about Fritz a sword seemed to stab her to the heart.

Up to this moment she had deemed herself satisfied with her behaviour so far as Fritz was concerned, and her reaction had been almost a feeling of triumph. Now, of a sudden, she was overwhelmed with anxiety. Why? She would have been hard put to it to explain, for she had not as yet seriously considered what was likely to be the upshot of the happenings that morning. But her heart was full of a boding fear, and a voice within her whispered: "Things may turn out badly."

She got up abruptly.

"I must be getting home, Dr. Shadow."

"Will you just be such a dear as to change my compress once more before you leave?"

Impossible to refuse this final service. But she was impatient to be gone!

"I'll write a few lines of farewell to my old friend the mechanic," she thought, as she made her final preparations.

"Good-bye, Dr. Shadow," she said with childlike simplicity. "And thank you for all your kindness. . . ."

A hand-shake, and she had left him to his own thoughts.

Chapter Twenty

GUDRUN AS HONEST BROKER

NEXT morning Gudrun brought Stumpy a letter to her bedside. The address was in Fritz's handwriting. Stumpy tore open the envelope, and read:

"MY DEAR ANNEMARIE:

"I wish I could still call you 'Stumpy.' But all that is at an end. My Stumpy has ceased to exist. Another has usurped her place, a girl who is a total stranger to me, one who has no corner for me in her heart. Nor will she find a corner in my heart henceforward! In memory she will continue to be Stumpy to me, and to the end of my days her image will dwell in my heart. But the young lady who spoke such terrible words yesterday, she must be forgotten.

"These few lines of farewell are addressed exclusively to the Stumpy who was once so dear to me. Thank you, thank you, and again thank you for every hour you gave me. Thank you for all you did up here in my eyrie. The place has become a sanctuary through your presence. Thank you for all the sunshine you brought into my solitude.

"Good-bye!

"Don't try to meet me again. You would only make our suffering—for I know that we shall both suffer from this separation—greater. We must henceforward march along the roads prescribed for us by fate, each of us alone, going our several ways. God grant that yours may not be as hard as mine promises to be.

"Good-bye.

"FRITZ.

"P.S. Please leave the keys with the porter downstairs."

Stumpy gave a cry as if her heart were breaking. A great sob rose in her throat. She tried to smother

her grief by burying her face in the pillow. All the sorrow of the world seemed to have become concentrated in that of this one small creature.

"Oh, Stumpy, Stumpy, darling, what is the matter?"

"Nothing! Nothing! Please go away. Leave me alone, please!"

She struck out at her sister with hands and feet. If only she could be left alone with her grief! If only they'd leave her to cry her heart out in peace!

But Gudrun was not to be shaken off so easily. She put her arms round Stumpy, wriggling her hands forward between her sister's face and the pillow, until at last, after a long and tender struggle, she had got the girl's head snugly on her shoulder.

As Stumpy now lay in her sister's arms, a thought, the first clear thought since the shock of Fritz's letter had felled her, crossed her mind. If any one in the whole world could help her that one person was surely Gudrun who was so wise and so experienced in love.

She decided to make a full confession, the first adequate one she had made since her adventure in the Savignyplatz. And since confession it was to be, she intended to hide nothing. Thus it was that she told Gudrun in how disloyal a way she had carried out the commission entrusted to her, and all about that first meeting with Fritz.

Gudrun clapped her hand to her forehead as light flooded in upon her memory.

"Oh, what a ninny I've been," she cried. "Of course, now I remember how he and I first became acquainted. No wonder his face seemed familiar. For some reason I was at a loss to explain, I always felt that he belonged to me."

"Belonged to you? What do you mean?" demanded Stumpy, alert and suspicious.

"Well, he is not your boy friend at all. He is, in actual fact, mine. I have a prior claim."

Stumpy felt vindictive. She could have scratched Gudrun's eyes out at such an announcement.

"If you ever dare to say such a thing again I'll have no further truck with you, so there," she exclaimed furiously.

Gudrun thought it would be better not to press her claim at so untoward a moment.

"There, there," she said soothingly, as she wiped the younger girl's tear-stained cheeks. "Now go on with your story, you wicked little sinner."

Poor Stumpy was obliged at this point to bring Dr. Shadow into the tale, and she faithfully told everything that had taken place between herself and the fascinating dentist. No detail went astray. From the first sight of the white smoking-jacket to the soft red glow which pervaded the X-ray room, all was recorded with the utmost precision. As Stumpy spoke, the sinister charm of the man who, yesterday, after his horsewhipping, had so ignominiously collapsed, rose vividly before her hearer's eyes.

Gudrun smiled her enigmatic smile.

"I've long thought as much," she said complacently, stroking Stumpy's hand gently, as if for the first time in her life Stumpy had become a veritable sister, a sister more closely related than by any ties of blood.

At this stage of the confession, the proceedings were interrupted by Mamma in full panoply, come to enquire why the girls were late for breakfast. But no sooner did she catch sight of Stumpy's swollen eyes than her mood softened, and jumping to a false conclusion, she took Gudrun's place on the bed saying tenderly:

"My poor darling, such is the fate of every woman

here below. She is forced to leave the home she loves and all her dear ones, to follow a man who is in reality a total stranger to her—yes, follow him wherever he chooses to go, even if it happens to be South America. You'll shed many more tears, poor little girlie, as the years pass."

"Oh, lor," thought Stumpy, squinting down at her engagement ring, "I'd forgotten all about old Gerberding!"

She had managed to put him off last night, but to-day he would be sure to insist upon his privileges as bridegroom elect. What a bore the man was with his kisses and his gifts! Were it not that she was buoyed up by the hope of getting an unfavourable report from the information bureau—this much at least she had Fräulein Elinor Schmitz to thank for!—she would have despaired even though her future life across the seas held such marvellous promise.

While these thoughts were speeding through Stumpy's brain, Mamma had dived into her reticule for a handkerchief in order to wipe the tears from her daughter's eyes. Not finding it there, she took her departure, proud of the solace her wide experience of life had been able to bring her darling child.

Gudrun listened to the worthy lady's retreating footsteps, until the sitting-room door opened and closed, when she knew that, for the moment at least, Stumpy and she would be free from parental interference.

"Good riddance," she exclaimed, returning to Stumpy's side. "Now I'll get Lina to bring us up a nice cup of tea, and we'll finish last night's sausage, for there's nothing gives one such an appetite as crying. Then you can take up your parable once more."

The program ran its course as Gudrun had planned,

and soon Stumpy had resumed her narrative. No detail was forgotten; everything that had taken place since Stumpy and Fritz had met again so unexpectedly beneath Herr Samuel's hospitable roof down to yesterday's catastrophe was poured into Gudrun's sympathetic ear.

"I'm afraid things are in a pretty bad way," said the elder girl when the tale had been told. "If you let him go now, you may never win him back to your side again."

"That's just what I most dread."

"And yet, why should you bother, seeing that in eight weeks at most you'll be sailing over the briny deep with your Herr Gerberding! What earthly good can you get out of Fritz, I should like to know?"

"You are a heartless little beast, Gudrun. You must realise that if I sail away leaving him behind vexed with me and despising me, I shall have to take the very next steamer home again—or jump into the sea."

Gudrun pondered a while.

"Yes, he must be kept on the lead somehow," she murmured meditatively.

"And you are the only person who can do it," cried Stumpy, flinging her arms round her sister's neck. "You are so clever. You know the ins and outs of everything. Please, please, help me now as you have so often helped me in the past."

"All right, I'll see what can be done. Meanwhile, though he says you're to leave the keys with the porter, I shall deliver them to him in person, and let things develop along their own lines."

Hope reawakened in Stumpy's heart. If Gudrun took the matter in hand it was sure to be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Eagerly she jotted down Fritz's address, the hours

when he was most often at home, the times when the postman was likely to call—for, she thought, he would have to come to the door for his letters.

"If even that does not entice him from his studies, you'll have to let yourself in, go down the passage and beard him in his den. Then—oh, then. . . ."

Stumpy had not the courage to imagine what might happen after that. But obviously Gudrun was already drawing up her plans of campaign; one could guess as much by the seraphic smile that played about the corners of her mouth.

The morning hours passed much as usual; there was housework to do, and there were lessons to give and to get. Gudrun behaved as if nothing out of the ordinary was in preparation; but Stumpy was devoured with impatience. Aimlessly she wandered from kitchen to parlour and back again; or she would stand looking up at the clock, begrudging the snail-like pace of the hands on the dial.

Towards twelve, when Gudrun was busy practising, Herbert came out of his room, and was greatly surprised at finding his younger sister at home.

"Didn't Dr. Shadow say anything about me yesterday?" asked Stumpy.

"No. He must have had a toothache, for his face was all bandaged up—not particularly appropriate for our saviour of toothachy mortals, eh? He just asked to be driven home, and then said he would not need the car again. What ought he to have told me?"

"That I've left."

"You look awfully cut up about it, to say the least."

"Oh, leave me alone! One can never talk sense with you."

"You just make sure of your little fiancé chap first, and then you'll see if I've any sense or not!"

His reference to Herr Gerberding sent a cold shiver down Stumpy's back, first because it seemed to confirm her dread that she would never now be able to get free from the man's clutches, and secondly because it recalled to her mind the pact she had willy-nilly entered into with Herbert some months ago.

"Anyway," he continued, "since you've left Dr. Shadow's service, I have no inclination at all to go on acting as his chauffeur. What I need is a situation in a family where the daughters are thoroughly up-to-date in their outlook on life. Well, well, so long, darling."

Therewith he turned on his heel and left Stumpy to her reflections.

When the family was at luncheon, Papa and Mamma were, with due reservations be it understood, told that their youngest daughter had ceased to be Dr. Shadow's assistant. They took the news phlegmatically enough. "Now," thought Stumpy, "Gudrun will be going on her errand." But no! Quite the contrary; she seemed in no hurry to start. She dressed and titivated as if preparing for a ball, even going so far as to suggest having her hair shampooed and waved.

Stumpy all the while was on tenter-hooks for her sister to be gone. At last, losing her temper, she said crossly:

"If you don't mean to take the keys, I'll go along myself and leave them with the porter as Fritz suggested."

Whereat Gudrun seemed suddenly to wake up and remember their undertaking.

"Oh, of course, the keys! Give them to me, quick!"

And in order to expedite matters, she plunged her hand into Stumpy's bag, and carried off the treasures in triumph.

The hours that followed, passed on leaden feet. Gudrun had left on her mission at three; surely she'd be back again by four? But five struck, and then six, and still she did not return. At seven, Herr Gerberding was to come for his fiancée as arranged. Oh, how could poor Stumpy face a whole evening in his company if, before she started, Gudrun had not come back.

At last, at long last, Stumpy heard her sister's latch-key turn in the lock. Flushed with her exertions, Gudrun, a huge parcel under her arm, stepped into the hall.

"There," she cried, letting the package slip to the ground. The sound of breaking china rose to Stumpy's ears. What could it be? Yet a sense of guilt informed her that in some way this parcel was connected with herself. Gudrun playfully tapped her on the cheek:

"La gazza ladra!" she exclaimed.

Stumpy knew the words as the title of an opera Gudrun was studying, a work by Rossini she thought. What did they mean? Oh, yes, now she remembered! "The thievish magpie," that was it.

And who was this "thievish magpie?" Why, to be sure, no one but Stumpy's own self! Here were all the things she had sneaked from her home in order to make Fritz more comfortable. After her first depredations, he had ceased to protest, for were they not a loan? Of course they were all going to be returned before Stumpy set sail on her wedding journey. But he had not waited so long. He had bundled them together and sent them back now, so that even this final connexion with her might be severed.

"Tell me all about it, quick!" urged Stumpy, hardly able to contain herself in her impatience.

Gudrun, however, was in no hurry to begin.

"Let's put all this litter away first," she said. "Otherwise we'll be caught red-handed!"

So saying she untied the string which kept the miscellany together. My, what a display! There was grandmother's ample shawl which had screened Fritz's clothes from the dust, a handy saucepan for making scrambled eggs, an earthenware pan for soup or rice or potatoes, a pepper-mill, a cover for the cheese, a bread-knife, two plates which must have got smashed as Gudrun flung the parcel down, besides various dust-ers and tablecloths (the latter with a red cross-stitch border such as adorned the family table linen!) and what not besides.

This amazing medley called up many a happy hour in Stumpy's memory, times when she had stood over the gas-stove preparing his supper. . . .

Now they caused nothing but sadness. It was enough to break any girl's heart.

Gudrun made short work of tidying the mishmash up, taking the kitchen utensils back to where they belonged, and the other things to the dining-room and her mother's bedroom. She put them away so that even the most attentive eye would not be aware of their reappearance. Having, finally, deposited the broken crockery in the dustbin, she announced her readiness to begin her tale. And yet, even now, Gudrun seemed loath to speak freely.

"Perhaps it would be best to say nothing about it. His point of view is that the revelation you made of yourself yesterday was too galling for him ever to . . . oh, and so forth, and so on! You're well quit of him, my dear. He belongs to another world, or, rather, to an earlier century. Anyhow it is obvious from the way he speaks that he has been awfully in love with you."

"That's true enough."

"Nowadays such love is quite out of date; we've got

used to change from the very start. You've been living in a world of magic, darling. I'm inclined to envy you, really I am."

"And it is hopelessly at an end?"

Stumpy felt that she was awaiting a sentence of death.

Gudrun shrugged:

"He says 'yes'; but I say 'no.' Otherwise he would not have agreed to see me once more."

"What? You are going to . . ." Hope revived in Stumpy's heart, hope curiously mingled with envy.

"Yes," answered Gudrun with a smile. "Then I'll show my Stumpy what I can do for her."

"Oh, you darling, you sweet, you dear," cried the younger girl throwing her arms again round the elder's neck.

All the same, she noticed that Gudrun's face had the enigmatical expression which betokened mischief; and Stumpy's gratitude for her sister's kindly help was tempered with a spice of uneasiness.

Chapter Twenty-one

STUMPY ACCOMPLISHES A HEROIC DEED

"My sweet little Annemiechen," said Herr Gerberding, "why don't you ever wear the pretty wrist-watch I gave you when we got engaged? It was a wonderful bargain, by the way. Really, I felt quite proud of myself for having spotted it."

"Forgive me, my dear Theodore, but I'd rather not wear any jewelry before I'm married. And then"—she hesitated, but plucking up courage, went on—"you know, that necklace you gave me is far and away too grand for me! It is the kind of thing a mature woman can carry off well, Mamma for instance—but not me."

"The necklace was likewise a bargain; I got it from a curio dealer. He told me it was at least a hundred years old. It is part of a set which I intend to give you little by little. There is a diadem belonging to it, a wonderful thing, which will look like a harvest crown when it is set among your fair hair. You'll look perfectly lovely in it."

"Maybe," thought Stumpy, "at a fancy-dress ball!" But she had no intention of wounding her fiancé, so she smiled up at him with a friendly and grateful light shining in her eyes. What else could she do?

Herr Gerberding had gradually slipped into the habit of visiting the old curiosity shops of Berlin to see what he could pick up in the way of oddments that looked very costly but could be purchased very cheap. He intended them to adorn his South American home, and they would come in useful as gifts for his future

bride; but, since he knew absolutely nothing about antiques, he was cheated right and left.

Occasionally of an evening he would show some of his purchases to Stumpy, hoping she would find a word of praise for his skill in unearthing such fine wares. If by a lucky chance she expressed a favourable opinion, the poor man was so encouraged that he would be sure to bring something else the very next visit. He was as happy as a child when he sallied forth on the hunt for other booty. On a wide shelf in the passage, was a growing collection of ancient oil-lamps, broken candelabra, rusty fruit baskets, statuettes of knights on horseback, girls at the spinning wheel, Japanese wrestlers, silver-plated dancers bearing lights in their mouths—all these trophies were destined to grace the Gerberdings' drawing-room in Buenos Ayres.

Herr Gerberding had taken Stumpy to Kempinski's on the evening now in question. The place was a recent discovery of his, and he had a special liking for it because it was cheap, so that he could economise as much as five marks on every meal. In the long run the saving thus effected was considerable.

"My dear little girl," said Herr Gerberding, "we must talk of serious things, now you have at last made up your mind to leave that horrible job of yours. You'll have time between whiles to think about your trousseau, and I want it to be worthy of your new position. You see how concerned I am to provide a suitable background for our future happiness; well, it is up to you to create a similar background for yourself, and to make it as sumptuous as possible. Once we get home, you'll have plenty of opportunities for re-furnishing your wardrobe; but meanwhile you'll have to make a good impression among the ladies during the voyage. We'll be travelling first class. As my newly

wedded wife I expect you to cut a fine figure, you know."

Stumpy blushed deeply, for the question of her trousseau had already been freely discussed in the family circle. Papa and Mamma had declared that of course they would have provided their daughter with everything necessary for her future home if she had been making an ordinary middle-class marriage. But since Stumpy was making a "great match," since she was going to enter the world where luxury prevailed, she would have to be fitted out accordingly, and the Lüdickes felt that the family budget could not rise to the occasion. They had decided, therefore, to wait until Herr Gerberding himself broached the subject, and then to suggest that he might shoulder at least part of the burden.

Whenever this topic came up for consideration, Stumpy felt miserable. It had always seemed to her impossible to say a word one way or the other. Now, of a sudden, the pistol was aimed point-blank at her heart, and she had not a notion which way to turn to avoid it.

"My dear Theodore, perhaps you will be so kind as to talk the matter over with Papa and Mamma. So far as I myself am concerned, my whole worldly wealth consists of my last month's salary paid me on leaving by Dr. Shadow."

Herr Gerberding was deeply moved, and pressed her hand affectionately, while Stumpy thought:

"Now I'll simply have to bestir myself if ever I am to get free of the man. To-morrow I'll go to the information bureau and set things in train."

In actual fact, the following afternoon saw Stumpy on the war-path.

The first thing she did was to go into her father's

office to study the Directory under the heading "Private Inquiry." Commission agents for the detection of criminals did not interest her. She turned the pages quickly. Private detectives: no, it was not that she wanted either, for she could never hope to find that Herr Gerberding was a common swindler. No such luck! Of course he had falsely vaunted his relations with important business people like Krupp and Jansen and Schmitz; but swank is one thing and fraud is another. She must begin by making enquiries as to the standing of his firm; and if she were to learn that it was really a poor one, she would at any rate have a tangible pretext for breaking off the engagement.

A large, rambling room, divided in two by a solid wooden partition. In the partition, various openings, guarded by wire sliding panels. Behind the partition, desks, at which male clerks were busily writing. Girls with Eton crops were hurrying backwards and forwards from this outer office to a sanctum within. Banging of doors; clattering of typewriters, crackling of grease-proof paper as certain of the employees sat eating lunch in a corner. In front of the partition, lounging on benches, were half a dozen men, lower-grade clerks and the like. They were talking and laughing among themselves as Stumpy entered—the only female thing this side of the cage. A girl typist came up to enquire her business. Instead of answering directly, Stumpy slipped a note over the counter. On the page she had written: "Herr Gerberding, Buenos Ayres."

"You are wanting information concerning this gentleman?"

"Yes, please."

"Personal, or business?"

"Business. And how much will it cost?"

"Twenty marks."

"Thank goodness," thought Stumpy. She had feared it might cost a lot more than that. "How long will it take?"

"Four weeks. Perhaps longer."

Oh, dear, that would never do. Stumpy had reckoned on ten minutes at the most.

"I can't afford to wait as long as that," she said, hesitatingly.

"Is it a German firm?"

"The name's German anyhow."

"Names don't mean much. Still, if it is a German firm, we may have the information you want in our books. If you care to wait a few minutes I'll go and enquire—unless you'd prefer us to write?"

Stumpy considered a moment. What if the missive should fall into her parents' hands? That would be fatal! She decided to wait.

So far so good. But as she turned to take a seat, she became aware of six inquisitive pairs of eyes fixed upon her in scorn and derision. This formidable inspection made her rather nervous. Still, as nothing happened, she plucked up heart and took her place on one of the benches, where she sat with downcast mien. At first every one was silent. Then one of the men said, with a query in his voice:

"Difficult to tell if one's lover is a cheat and a swindler or not, eh?"

"She's quite right to try and make sure," said another. "One can't be too particular."

"He may have a dozen other fiancées for all she knows," observed a third.

"Excuse me, Miss," enquired her neighbour on the bench, "but where did you make his acquaintance, in a bus or at a hop?"

Whereupon the man on her right asserted:

"At the pictures, of course! Where else? His arm nudged hers as if by accident—the rest followed. I'm right, aren't I, Miss?"

Stumpy could bear it no longer. She jumped up and made for the door. Once she had reached the haven of the street, tears began to pour down her cheeks, tears of shame and bitterness.

No, she decided, she had not the strength of will to face such coarseness again. Thank goodness, Herbert could be relied on to help her! She'd put the whole thing into his able hands. No one would dare insult him. . . .

Next morning found her knocking at his door. He opened to her, deigned to greet her with a condescending "Good morning," and invited her in. He looked very elegant in his brocade dressing-gown, his hair fragrant with pomade, his chin well powdered after shaving.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, little one?" he said with superior graciousness.

Stumbling over her words in her humiliation, Stumpy told him what had occurred yesterday.

"Ah, so you've got that far, have you? I fear, however, that we shan't achieve much along those lines. Still, I don't mind trying. By the way, who put this Sherlock Holmes idea into your little head? You'd never have thought of it yourself."

"A friend of mine," she answered hastily, "is engaged to a young lady who is very wealthy and very much sought after. It's this young lady who gave me the hint."

"Rich young woman—seems to be a quarry of sorts! Who may she be, if you don't mind saying?"

"Her name is Fräulein Schmitz. She is related to the Schmitzes of Soest."

"You don't say! She does not happen to possess an extremely pretty Christian name—Elinor, for instance?"

"Do you know her?"

"Why, of course, who does not know her indeed! She's often been engaged before—to me myself at one time. What do you think of that?"

Stumpy was rendered absolutely speechless with surprise. After a while, recovering her composure, she asked diffidently how it came about.

"How should it be otherwise when a fellow is reasonably good-looking, an excellent dance partner, and cannot be taken for a hairdresser or a waiter? Besides, I can still cut a dash with my erstwhile promotion to flight lieutenant. That surrounds a chap with a sort of halo, you know. She's a fine specimen of the shrew! What else can you expect in the daughter of high finance and a mother who apes the masculine forms of morality? A wild thing, I can tell you. All the same, I should have tamed her in the end. Only she had recourse to the information bureau, and when she found out I was a chauffeur and the son of a chocolate maker her 'serious intentions' came to an end. . . . So much I am at liberty to tell you; but now my confidences must cease. Full stop! And may I enquire how you came to know my lost love?"

"I—I—I—"

"Oho! I understand! I shall not enquire further, my dear. Instead, let us see what can be done about your Herr Gerberding."

As was his custom in all things, even this most

solemn of difficulties, Herbert treated as if it were the merest bagatelle. Well, Stumpy would have to resign herself to that!

She waited a couple of days before asking him whether he had found out anything yet.

"I must have this chauffeur business behind me first," he said. "Dr. Shadow won't let me go until he has found a successor. Once quit of him, I'll nose around like a sleuth."

"Couldn't you get up a little earlier of a morning," expostulated Stumpy.

He had never thought of that!

"Why, yes, of course I could," he answered complaisantly, while Stumpy made a mental note that she would wake him before nine on the morrow.

When the time came, however, to put her resolve to the test, she found she had not the courage. . . .

A few days later Herr Gerberding came to spend an evening "in the intimacy of the family circle," and it so happened that a serious divergence of opinion arose between him and his prospective parents-in-law.

"I hope," he began after a great deal of hemming and hawing, "you will not take what I am about to say amiss, but it seems to me that, though the wedding day is fast approaching, you have not yet begun to consider the question of Annemiechen's trousseau. If I might be permitted a suggestion, surely it would be preferable, dear Frau Lüdicke, to be at work on my future bride's underwear, rather than knitting away at that flimsy shawl you have in hand. Even if you are not an adept in the arts of plain sewing, your effort in that direction would do you credit and would at least prove your good will."

"I can't help feeling he's right," thought Stumpy,

in spite of the growing horror her coming marriage inspired.

But Mamma was not one to allow herself to be put upon. She drew herself up as she sat, her comely eyes flashing deadly sparks in the direction of her assailant, and her red-gold hair bristling with the strength of her indignation.

"My dear Herr Gerberding," she said, her lips curling with scorn, "no one hitherto has ever ventured to give me lessons on housewifely occupations. Not even my husband, who surely is in this respect a privileged person, has ever done so. —I beg your pardon, dear Gottfried, did you speak."

"There, there, my dear," murmured Papa, stroking her hand appeasingly.

Mamma shook him off gently, and went on:

"As for my daughter's trousseau, we are not so conceited as to fancy our purse can in any way compete with that of a man who prides himself on his 'conqueror's nature,' and who would wish his future bride to participate in his conquests. We are giving him our beloved child, just as she is, and we are even permitting him to spirit her away to a distant land. I cannot imagine that such confidence as we are showing can in any way be enhanced by my doing a little 'plain sewing' on the 'future bride's underwear.' Don't you agree with me, dear Gottfried?"

"There, there," repeated Papa. "I'm sure Herr Gerberding had nothing censorious in mind when he made the suggestion."

"Quite the contrary," interpolated Herr Gerberding somewhat crestfallen. "All I meant was—was . . ."

He could get no further, for Mamma's eyes were staring him out of countenance.

At this point Gudrun stepped into the breach. She

had been sitting at the piano, lightly touching the keys with her agile fingers, and listening with a mischievous smile to all that went on.

"You will excuse me, Herr Gerberding," she said, "if, while agreeing that at bottom you may be right, I suggest that you are somewhat behind the times. In our grandmother's day great preparations for a girl's wedding were all the vogue. But those times are over and done with. Why should we put ourselves to all that trouble nowadays? Everything a girl can possibly desire is to be found ready-made in our shops. I can guarantee that in a single morning's shopping I should be able to get together a trousseau fit for a princess, and I shouldn't even need a taxi. I know my parents better than you, and I can tell you here and now that on the morning of my sister's wedding day not an item will be found missing. The cost of a trousseau suitable for the young lady you have chosen for your future wife must of course be furnished by the bridegroom. That goes without saying."

As always when Gudrun took a matter in hand, her dictum settled the problem then and there. Before any answer was forthcoming, she had turned on the music-stool, and her deft fingers were flying over the keys of the piano in dramatic arpeggios. But Stumpy, with clenched teeth, said resolutely to herself:

"To-morrow, come what will, I'll go right up to Herbert's bed and wake him."

And that is what she did in very fact. The young man, roused from blissful dreams, was naturally somewhat put out. But he soon recovered his temper.

"You little gadfly," he exclaimed. "Well, now your wicked deed is done I'd better have a cigarette to keep me from falling asleep again. Get me my case and

the lighter, there's a dear. After that, I'm your man wholeheartedly."

And, indeed, hardly more than thirty minutes later he was ready to do her bidding.

Next morning he presented Stumpy with a memorandum.

"Just as I feared," he said disdainfully. "Such an insignificant creature as your Herr Gerberding has not enough imagination to be a king among swindlers. Besides, why should any one try to get anything out of a girl who has no assets at all—except a valuable half-brother, and your man's such an ass that he's quite incapable of recognising my worth!"

Alas, the information written on the memo blasted all Stumpy's hopes of escape.

"Business flourishing. Credit good. One of the most solid among the younger German firms," and so forth and so on.

Crushing!

"What's my next move?" asked Stumpy, perplexed.

"Take a sheet of rose-coloured paper, scent it with Chypre, and write him a letter giving him his congé. It does not matter what the reports say; he's a bad egg. My little Stumpy doesn't cut a big figure in the world, I admit. But Herr Gerberding is more insignificant still, even if his business happens to be the biggest in the whole of Argentina. Once you've got rid of him, you and I will try our luck together."

"What just do you mean by that?"

Stumpy had an intuition that perhaps Herbert was once again referring to that puzzling proposition of his, and she felt uneasy. But he only laughed, and went his ways.

"Now to work," thought Stumpy, as she got out

paper, pencils, pens, india-rubber, and envelopes. In three (or at most four) hours, she had managed to write the letter to Herr Gerberding. She explained that the nearer the day of parting from her family approached, the less she was able to contemplate the separation with equanimity. She was very fond of him, and felt sure that life at his side would have proved happy. But the unknown country where she would have to make a new home, the long voyage when in any case she was a bad sailor, the fact that it would be summer at her arrival in Buenos Ayres when in Germany the winter would have already set in—all these things caused her terrible anxiety. Besides, she was over young to marry yet, and . . .

In the end she had worked herself up into such a state of self-commiseration, that her tears flowed freely, staining the paper. Well, tear-stained paper would make an excellent impression, and would doubtless help in conveying to the recipient the genuineness of her feelings!

Stumpy dropped the letter into the pillar-box. Now she had to face the severest ordeal of all: to break the news to her parents. Up to this point, she had kept her plans very much to herself, never betraying her thoughts by so much as a word. Even Gudrun had no inkling of what was afoot. Stumpy felt that her sister's support was absolutely indispensable if the battle with Papa and Mamma was to be fought to a successful conclusion. So she decided to let Gudrun into her schemes. But for some time now Gudrun had been elusive. Stumpy was puzzled in the extreme what to make of her behaviour. She seemed to be one big secret. She offered no explanations, she evaded every question; and if Stumpy wept and begged her to tell

what was her game, Gudrun would say with a sidelong glance and her enigmatic smile:

"You surely don't imagine I can force myself upon your Fritz? I've got to wait patiently until he chooses to invite me up. Besides, I am swotting awfully hard for my finals just now."

In truth, Gudrun was working harder than she had ever worked before. She practised assiduously, more than was good for her voice; and when she was too tired to sing, she would still be conning a part sotto voce. The piano lessons she gave were far more conscientiously given than of old, whether at home on the Lüdicke piano, or away at her pupils'. Stumpy had merely to use the telephone to convince herself that Gudrun was not playing truant, but was in very fact busy where she was supposed to be. But when the lessons were over, how did Gudrun spend her time? That remained a mystery.

"Perhaps she's gone to see him," thought Stumpy, her throat dry with apprehension.

In the evenings, Gudrun seemed excited and distraught. There was no catching her eye. She seldom went out after supper now. Indeed, Stumpy had never known her sister to be so serious. Obviously, new and important things had entered her life, and Stumpy could not help feeling that Fritz must have something to do with Gudrun's changed demeanour.

Still, Stumpy knew she could not break the news about Herr Gerberding to her parents unless Gudrun had been won over to her aid. Nerved by having posted the letter to her betrothed, she burst forth:

"Look here, Gudrun, I've come to the conclusion I'd rather not marry. I simply could not live so far from Fritz. Even if I am never to see him again, at

least I can be breathing the same air, and that's not so bad. I hardly wish for greater happiness here below."

If Stumpy imagined her sister would fall on her neck enraptured at the news, she was very much mistaken. Quite otherwise. Gudrun's eyes stared at her, a horrified expression in their depths; Gudrun's mouth opened, and her tongue seemed to be seeking for words.

"What? You have . . ."

"Yes. Why not? I've written to tell him my decision. What do I care for his rotten old cars? I'm happier by far driving in a bus!"

"But what about Papa and Mamma?"

"I haven't told them yet. All I can say is that nobody's going to force me into marriage against my will."

"When did you write to Herr Gerberding?"

"He'll soon be getting my letter now."

"Then run along as quick as you can, and beg him to give it back to you unopened. If by ill luck he has already read it, tell him it was all a mistake, that you are sorry, that, that . . . Or shall I go for you?"

Stumpy was outraged.

"Look here," she cried indignantly, "I thought you'd do everything in your power to keep me from going on with this marriage. Instead you are taking Herr Gerberding's side against me. If you fancy the prospect so greatly why don't you marry him yourself? My blessing will go with you!"

Gudrun, who was sitting on the music-stool with her back to the piano, leaned her elbows heavily on the keys, thus producing a horribly discordant sound. She looked as nonplussed as Stumpy had before the great resolve had taken shape and brought consolation in its train. At that moment Stumpy suddenly remembered certain words once uttered by Gudrun: "What use will

he be to you in South America? If you were a really nice little sister you'd bequeath him to me." And to think that she was not sure whether Gudrun was seeing Fritz or not! Suspicion began to ripen within her. Could it be that Gudrun wanted to be rid of her in order to have no interloper where Fritz was concerned?

Stumpy's heart was filled with hatred; but an inward monitor urged: "For God's sake don't let her see how you are feeling about it all. If you do, you'll have made another enemy, and then things will go from bad to worse."

Summoning all her arts of dissimulation to her aid, she said coaxingly:

"Please, dear Gudrun, do help me. Help me to stay here. Please, please!"

Hardly had she said the words when she realised that her move was the right one. Gudrun bent forward, took Stumpy's head affectionately between her hands, and drew the younger girl on to her knee.

Stumpy's feeling of hatred vanished as quickly as it had arisen—perhaps not entirely, but very nearly. If Gudrun really helped her out of this difficulty she could not be as bad as Stumpy had feared, and surely she would leave Fritz to his rightful owner in the end. Stumpy's hand crept round Gudrun's neck in a loving embrace.

"If you are really and truly in earnest, then . . ."

said Gudrun looking down into Stumpy's upturned face.

"Of course, oh, of course I'm in earnest. . . ."

". . . then I'll do what I can to help you, right or wrong. . . ."

So saying, she sprang to her feet, pressing her arms to her side, and shivering a little.

That same evening the Lüdickes all got together as usual after the day's work was done.

The hanging lamp, with its elaborate shade of beads, shed a soft radiance upon Mamma as she busily plied her crochet-hook, putting the finishing touches to the gossamer-fine shawl which was to protect her against the first chill winds of winter. Papa was deep in accounts and new recipes. Gudrun was improvising at the piano.

"Is Herr Gerberding coming to take you out?" asked Mamma.

"I don't think so," answered Stumpy, casting a look full of appeal in Gudrun's direction.

"Then he'll probably spend the evening in the family circle."

Gudrun heaved a very audible sigh.

"What's the matter?" enquired Mamma, turning round to face her elder girl.

"I was just thinking—he's not a very entertaining visitor."

"Well, he hasn't asked you to marry him, has he?" Mamma did not often speak thus sharply, and Gudrun had no repartee ready. Thus the first onslaught seemed to have failed. Nothing abashed, however, she began the assault once more.

"Next thing we'll have to do is to start buying—and vigorously at that," she announced, punctuating her words with crisp chords.

"What do you mean by 'buying'?" enquired Mamma, with a suspicious glance in the direction of the piano. Even Papa pricked up his ears.

"Surely you remember what was said the other day? We know now how he feels about it. He expects a considerable outlay on our side, for he did not appear satisfied until I spoke of a trousseau fit for a princess that I could purchase in the course of a single morning."

"But you told him he'd have to pay for it," said Mamma, her manner becoming increasingly agitated as she spoke.

"Of course, of course! Still, can you remember his agreeing to do so?"

"He'll have a long time to wait if he wants me to foot the bill!" put in Papa, running his fingers through his thick grey hair. "I shall have my stars to thank if I can get enough money together to pay for the materials I shall need for the Christmas confectionery."

"All the same, it's a painful situation for us. It's always unpleasant to have to make a display of one's poverty."

"No one can possibly apply such a word as poverty to us," said Mamma. "Herr Gerberding regards us as quite comfortably off."

"So much the worse then," rejoined Gudrun. "He'll simply think us mean."

"I can't for the life of me discover upon what foundation the man places his demands," cried Mamma waxing yet more indignant. "He feeds us up with a lot of fairy tales about his fabulous wealth and his flourishing business and his luxurious way of living and all the rest. But how much of it is true, I should like to know?"

Gudrun pursed up her lips, as who should say: "God helping, I'll land you now, my dear!" Following up her advantage, she said:

"Judging by the things he has bought for his future home I should say he was used to a very low standard of life. We ourselves should be ashamed for our friends to see the clutter he has collected and displayed in the passage."

"My poor child!" exclaimed Mamma, casting a lachrymose eye in Stumpy's direction.

"Probably everything else is to scale," continued Gudrun. "Yes, the more I come to think of it the more convinced I am that, if we made inquiries as to the fellow's antecedents we'd find out such awful things about him that it would be a crime to allow our dear little Stumpy to set up house with such a creature."

All this time Stumpy had ostensibly been drawing little men on the sheet of paper before her, but in reality she had been keenly attentive to the conversation going on around her. Now that Gudrun had cast suspicion upon Herr Gerberding's bona fides as a business man, her sense of justice was aroused and she could not refrain from taking up the cudgels in his behalf. Even if he had misled her as to his relations with the Krupps and Jansons and Schmitzes, it was only because he was in love with her. At bottom he was an upright man.

"Excuse my chipping in," she said diffidently. "But I have already got the information you refer to."

"You?" said Papa, greatly surprised, and feeling somewhat rebuked, for surely if any one was to make such enquiries it was he as head of the family.

"Or, rather, to be strictly accurate, it was Herbert who did so at my request."

"Well? What came of it?" asked Papa and Mamma together, while Gudrun cast an angry look at Stumpy for such unsolicited interference.

But Stumpy kept a cool head. True, she wanted to be free of Herr Gerberding, but he was not to be blackened unjustly on her account, poor man.

For answer, she drew forth a slip of paper, and, smoothing it out, laid it before her parents on the table.

Could you believe it! The effect of its perusal on Papa and Mamma was precisely the same as it had

been on Stumpy. Their faces fell with disappointment. Thus far, Gudrun's disgruntling tactics had worked famously. She had forsaken her perch on the music-stool and was looking over her parents' shoulders at the document.

Again the elder girl looked angrily at the younger. Then, with an assumption of calm:

"Very natural that you should rally to him, my dear," she said. "Only you are not in question just now. Evidence of that kind may be of importance when he is thinking of engaging a new clerk or of acquiring one of his famous options, but in the case we are discussing . . ."

"Quite right," said Mamma; and even Papa nodded approval.

"Talking of options reminds me that at the very beginning of our acquaintance he asked for an option on Papa's Cream-Almond-Orange Pastilles. That was months ago. I've not heard that he has done anything about it yet. Agreed, he's been on the job here. But what's he got two representatives over there for if not to launch such things in his behalf? Either the man is incompetent, or he was just blarneying you—and one's as bad as the other. Think what a lot of false hopes he aroused in your mind, Papa! Why . . ."

But Papa had sprung to his feet, and was pacing up and down the room a prey to unconquerable agitation. It was obvious to any one that he was in the throes of some fierce and irrevocable resolve. Just like him, dear Papa! He, who as a rule could never make up his mind, on such occasions astonished every one with truly revolutionary decisions.

Mamma, on the contrary, sat motionless, her lips compressed almost malevolently as she gazed fixedly before her.

Into this tense atmosphere there now burst the sound of the front-door bell.

"It's he!" exclaimed Stumpy thoroughly alarmed. Yes, it could be no other than he, come to complain of her fickleness. She did not want ever to meet the man again, and made as if to leave the room.

"Stumpy, dear, reflect," she heard Mamma protesting. "You've still time to change your mind. Don't do anything in a hurry."

"I've already written to him to say I don't want to marry him," said Stumpy, laughing and crying at one and the same time.

A minute later she found herself kneeling by her bedside, her face buried in the pillow, and repeating over and over again:

"Oh, Fritz, darling Fritz! Dear, dear, dear Fritz."

After a while she grew calmer. She felt like slipping out the back way and eavesdropping at the door of that room wherein decisions were being made upon which her destiny seemed to hang by a thread.

Nor could she fail to see now, with abundant clarity of vision, how small was the part she herself was to play in the shaping of that destiny. She was nothing but a poor little girl who might be thankful if her elders and betters allowed her to go through life without making a "good match." Yes, she would listen at the door!

As she pressed her ear to the keyhole she could hear no more than a medley of voices, though the name "Annemarie" detached itself from time to time from the confusion of noise. Herr Gerberding had never even had the gumption to discover that she was really called "Stumpy!"

Disappointed, she returned to her room and, in order

to make doubly sure she would not be summoned to the family conclave, she undressed and went to bed.

She had fallen asleep once, twice, starting up in alarm between whiles. A third time she was awakened by the turning of the door-handle, and Gudrun slipped quietly in.

"Mamma and Papa send their love. They won't come to disturb you any more to-night. Poor Papa is so upset, Mamma will have to calm him down if he is to get any sleep."

"Yes . . . and?"

"And what?"

"Herr Gerberding?"

"Oh, him! He is to send for his clutter to-morrow. You'd better give back his ring, and the other presents he made you, at the same time. Then the incident can be considered closed."

Stumpy flung rapturous arms round her sister's neck.

"Oh, how can I thank you, darling Gudrun?"

Gudrun took Stumpy's head between her hands and looked deep into the younger girl's eyes.

"Thank me? Thank me!" she exclaimed, a strange note of self-contempt in her voice.

Not knowing what to make of her sister's mood, and feeling utterly crushed, Stumpy crept back into bed and switched off the light on her night-table.

But sleep was now gone beyond recall.

Chapter Twenty-two

SHISHKIN, OF THE RUSSIAN BALLET

THE first thing Stumpy did on the following day was to rush off to Herbert's room and tell him the great news.

"High time too," he laughed. "Now it's my turn to take the lead!"

Ah! At last she was to learn what Herbert had in store for her. Curiosity sparkled in her eyes.

"Quite simple, my dear. You might have guessed what it was after our first practice together. We are to go into business partnership, become a famous pair of dancers. Managers will be vying with each other to engage us."

Stumpy was so taken aback that her legs felt all wobbly. She could not tell whether joy or fright was uppermost in her heart. A thousand dreams that had been rigorously thrust aside now seemed on the point of becoming realities. And yet how could she, poor little insignificant Stumpy, ever hope to rise adequately to the occasion? From out the kaleidoscope of her emotions, one question rose clear: "What will Fritz say to it?"

Then a memory became vivid in her mind: her triumph when she and Herbert had danced together in the moonlit dancing-hall, the people clustering round to congratulate and applaud. "Oh, he can't help but be happy at my success! He'll be proud of me."

The thought of Fritz's approval turned the scale in favour of acceptance.

"But what about Papa and Mamma? What will they have to say?"

"That you are not of age yet! So we'll have to work upon them to get their approval. Don't you bother your head about that part of the business. I'll attend to it. I'll show them what a lot of money we shall be able to earn, and so forth. They won't long refuse their consent, you'll see. Of course we can't tell beforehand how the plan will shape itself. We'll have to see first of all if you are teachable or not."

"Haven't I learnt all there is to learn?" asked Stumpy innocently.

Herbert laughed aloud.

"You've got a nerve! Why, even if we are to perform the ordinary ball room dances decently we'll have to practise like mad. I'm ambitious for us both. I want us to make our *début* in fancy dancing, something specially adapted to your talents—for we have to bear in mind that you lack line. Of course you've grown a bit these last few months, but you are still our little Stumpy. What we've got to do is to turn this disadvantage to good account—and that's where fancy dancing comes in."

"Costume?"

He ignored the question and went on:

"Even my ingenuity is not capable of thinking out the kind of thing I have in mind. We shall need an expert's advice. If I had the necessary money, I'd go to *Blanvalet* or to *Nigrel*. But I have not saved enough for that—neither out of the salary *Dr. Shadow* has been paying me (by the way, I'm giving him notice to-day quite definitely, not going to wait till he finds some one else), nor by my dancing activities. Still, as you may remember, I have an old acquaintance, a ballet master, who knows I shan't be able to pay him

now, but who is content to await results if when he's seen us do something together he thinks well of us. I'll get along to him now and make arrangements for a meeting."

Herbert went into the passage, and for some time was busy at the telephone. When he returned to Stumpy, he said:

"Put on your things, and come along. He's able to see us right away."

A quarter of an hour later they were sitting in a street-car, driving to the rendezvous. Herbert, as he got in, had pulled a long face at having to make use of such a plebeian conveyance, for he had got used to driving about in a fine private auto. Still, beggars can't be choosers!

Now they stood before an apartment house in the poorer quarter of the west end. Up three flights, and they found a door bearing the legend:

"Shishkin, Professor of Dancing."

The brother and sister were shown into a barrack-like room almost completely devoid of furniture. Around the walls was a continuous alignment of chairs. A huge mirror occupied the whole of one end. In the embrasure near the window was a dishevelled looking piano, and over against the opposite wall the corner of an oaken gramophone chest protruded from a welter of discs and sheets of music.

The aspect of the room was certainly not calculated to inspire confidence.

A door at the other end was flung open, and a man of medium height entered. He was slim of figure and young looking, save for the grizzled beard which was trimmed to a point and contrasted strangely with the owner's lissome movements. A delicately chiselled face out of which peered a pair of gentle, blue eyes, deep-

set and circled by dark shadows, a face so delicate indeed that it would have become a girl almost better.

The hand, too, that now shook Stumpy's, was slim and frail as a woman's. Suddenly, while these formal greetings were in progress, a feeling of absolute confidence in the man spread throughout the girl's whole being. He had turned to Herbert, and was saying in a soft, almost plaintive voice:

"Eet iss long time seence you come. I fought you not come anee more."

Then he looked at Stumpy, taking the whole of her little person into his glance, which was at one and the same time meditative and somewhat derogatory. He half closed his eyes, and raising his arms in a curve, made as it were a frame around her.

Hardly realising what she did, but overwhelmed with shyness at such close scrutiny, Stumpy crossed her hands protectively over her breast.

"Stay like vat! Stay like vat!" exclaimed the dancing master in great excitement, his eyes brightening with surprise, while with his arms he again sketched a frame around the girl. "I've got an idea! Yess, I've got an idea! See, children, vat gesture iss eenspired by artistic intuition. I learned to appreciate vat while at imperial ballet in Petrograd, where I had greatest success, before I became poor émigré and had to beg bread of hunger . . ."

Even Herbert showed an unwonted amount of pleasure at the Russian's enthusiasm, and forthwith began to build castles in the air. Soon, however, he resolutely dragged himself back to earth again.

"Now, let us see what you can make of ve tango, just the ballroom tango, no more."

By now Stumpy had thrown off her shyness; and

when Herbert's arm went round her, she automatically fell into step, executing the figures they had once before rehearsed together.

"Goot, goot, goot," cried Shishkin. "Now ve double ciseaux! Now promenade à reculons! Goot, goot! And now, my children, show me what you can do out of your own heads."

Stumpy's heart was beating outrageously. Was she going to succeed? Was it all going to prove a disastrous failure?

She felt herself lifted into the air, and, as always on these occasions, her whole being was invaded with a sense of joy and bliss. From very far away a voice reached her ears, saying:

"Goot, goot! Well done!"

She slid from Herbert's arm, she turned round him, her body swung gently forward in perfect rhythm with his, she pivoted while Herbert chasséd round her, all the lovely movements of the tango succeeded one another, and Stumpy felt herself carried along on the wings of the wind. At last he raised her aloft on his hands in a final pose, while Shishkin cried:

"Goot, excellent! Or, I should really say, not goot at all. Come down from your perch, little one. Ve vant none of your acrobatics."

Herbert whistled softly through his teeth in order to hide his breathlessness, while the dancing-master delivered himself thus:

"What you have just been doing iss a natural art, artistic nature dancing, or, as I prefer to style it: a manifestation of dilettantism. What our little balleteuses and messieurs les officiers d'autrefois used to perform on our stages. Ve next step for us is to make a real art out of it. Our first essay ve vill entitle: Modesty. But modesty in a cabaret is some-

thing quite different from modesty in ve home. You, my fine gentleman, your part will ve vat of seducer, see? But all your arts of seduction vill prove in vain. Vat's somefing new, eh? In modern times such a fmg is unknown, eh? Now to work! You, little one, everyfmg I do you have got to imitate. Understood?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Shishkin had become metamorphosed into a shy young girl who, with anxious mien and slightly turned-in toes, was making a hesitant entry, her eyes hardly able to believe what they saw around them.

"You are asking yourself: 'Vere am I?' And: 'Vere is my dear mamma? How have I got into vis cabaret? Why are all vese people so looking at me? Who is vis handsome young man coming towards me? Oh, how lovely he looks!' See, little one? And now do just what I do. Of course it vill not be exact eemitation—but no matter! Diddle dee dee dee, diddle dum. Un, deux, trois. Diddle do do dee. Un, deux, trois. Ve vill turn on the museek. As tender as ve petal of a rose. Diddle dum dee dee. So, now you do it, little one."

He tripped over to the gramophone, wound it up, and set the disc turning.

Stumpy felt that the whole future depended upon how she reacted during the next few minutes. She had no anxiety. Quite otherwise. No sooner did the gramophone start to pour forth its nasal whine, than Shishkin disappeared and Herbert disappeared. Instead of the bleak room into which the dank November daylight was filtering, she saw before her a brilliantly lighted hall wherein men in evening dress and women with bare arms were moving to and fro. Now she suddenly felt very shy. But hers was not the shyness

caused by diffidence as to her own capacities. It was the shyness of the maiden Shishkin had told her to impersonate.

She glided to and fro, seeming not to know which way to turn. Then Herbert began to move forward. He swayed towards her with mincing steps until he had her almost in his arms, when she slipped coyly away, he in hot pursuit. Indeed, they performed the dance as if it had all been rehearsed before.

Shishkin, carried away by enthusiasm, cried:

"Goot, goot! Excellent! Vat may catch on; it may prove une affaire d'importance for uss all. Come to-morrow morning at ten. Ve vill get to work. In six weeks' time. Perhaps four weeks. Ven ve vill be ready."

So her fate was decided, and Stumpy listened in a dream while Herbert and Shishkin drew up an agreement as to terms. The latter was to have a percentage of future takings; he was to stand the cost of an accompanist for the practices, and a musician to make the orchestral scores. As soon as the contract was drawn up in writing, the brother and sister could go home.

There were still the Lüdicke parents to consider; how to tell them these plans, how to get their consent. Stumpy had grave misgivings as to whether they would ever give their consent.

"Don't you happen to have a friend or some one you could go for a walk with?" asked Herbert.

"Why?"

"Oh, just some one to while away a weary hour with during the time I get to work on the old man and Mamma."

For a moment Stumpy was tempted to tell him about

Fritz. But, caution prevailing, she merely took leave of Herbert at the entrance of the Tiergarten, and went her solitary way down one of the alleys.

A wonderful hour! Stumpy was lifted right out of herself, her mind filled with happy plans for the future.

Plainer and ever plainer did it become that she would win Fritz back to her side by her art. Such talents as heaven had granted her were of value solely to this end. Be Fritz never so vexed with her, once he had seen what a little "dancing genius" (Herbert's expression) she was, he would surely come back to her, full of contrition for ever having cast her off.

When she got home, she saw at once that Herbert had been at work.

Mamma was waiting her return on the front-door step, and clasped her to an ample and motherly bosom, while dear Papa hovered around with beaming countenance as if his little girl had already won laurels. Gudrun alone appeared unimpressed. When the sisters were alone together the elder said reproachfully:

"You're an ungrateful little beast, aren't you? Here have I been working like a nigger to get you out of your difficulties, and you haven't even had the decency to let me into your secrets!"

Stumpy shrugged her shoulders, and said derisively: "Pah!"

"What do you mean with your 'pah'?"

"It means," answered Stumpy with rising vexation, "that the next time you go to see Fritz you'll be telling him all about it and of course he ought not to hear anything until I've made good. See?"

Gudrun screwed up her eyes.

"In the first place, I don't know whether, and, if I do, when, I shall be seeing him again. Secondly, it's

up to you to tell me what to do. For instance, does it happen to be your wish that I should hide from him the fact that you have jilted Herr Gerberding?"

For all answer, Stumpy flung her arms round her sister's neck. Then she cried:

"Oh, Gudrun, you darling, if only I could be sure you were straight with me!"

"I do what I can, and carry out your wishes so far as I am able. Aren't you satisfied?"

Stumpy could not answer, and, as usual, felt that Gudrun had come off best from the contest.

When Stumpy and Herbert reached Shishkin's at ten on the morrow, they found he had changed his plans.

"Ah, vere you are, dear children. Vell, I do not think Modesty is just the subject ve vant. Not in the spirit of the age, you know. People might feel personally piqued, vose I mean who have not modesty. Ve must think out anover plan. You know vat celebrated peecture called 'La cruche cassée'? Vell, now, here," and he pointed to Stumpy, "ve have 'La cruche entière.' How can ve contrive to make of her a 'cruche cassée.' Vat is just what our dance will have to tell."

He minced his way to the gramophone cabinet, and, taking an earthenware pitcher which stood ready on the top, he presented it to Stumpy.

"It vill cost quite a lot of money to replace. Each rehearsal, one pitcher. But it matters not. Maidenly eyes vill heal all again!"

Herbert laughed, lending himself genially to the Russian's brand of humour. Then the lesson began.

Day after day they were resumed. Always there was something new to learn. The professor's encouraging "goot, goot, goot," was not always forthcom-

ing. Quite the contrary! He had much fault to find, and many reproaches to make for Stumpy's lack of memory.

Still, in the end, the pair of them managed to fulfil all Shishkin's demands.

The remainder of each day, Stumpy lived in a world of dreams. Her whole mind seemed absorbed in her work.

But all the time, whether awake or asleep, whether at work or at rest, one thought never quitted her: "What will Fritz have to say to it?"

As time went on, however, and Gudrun brought her no news of Fritz, Stumpy became less and less worried as to what his opinion might be. She knew that an hour would surely come when everything would fall out according to her heart's desire.

Shishkin had been correct in his surmise. Every day a pot was broken. That meant at least one mark fifty! But Shishkin was not to be ruffled by such a minor issue.

"If cruche not broken, imagination cannot work. Besides I make provision by dozen. Ven it comes cheaper. Misfortunes are not so big when vey occur by ve dozen—just as in real life, eh?"

The climax of the dance presented many difficulties. The obvious thing would be to gather up the fragments, this being a piece of practical symbolism—for they must leave the place tidy for the dances which were to follow. But how to make an artistic exit?

Stumpy herself found the solution to this problem—unconsciously, of course, but that mattered not. It was at the moment when all three were trying to excogitate a suitable ending. Stumpy stood, pensive, the broken pitcher in her arms, when suddenly the dancing-master exclaimed:

"You've got it! Voilà le tableau! Ve very fing ve need! Looks like a vision. Every one can see it for himself. Every one vill recognise it. Every one vill be delighted. Just stand like vat, perfectly still, till vey begin to clap and to call out: 'Lovely!'"

"But suppose no applause is forthcoming?" objected Herbert.

"It vill be forthcoming; you'll see! Ve'll need to stage ve fing of course so every one get same goot view."

"That's all very well, but how can we cart about a stage, I should like to know?"

"Ve vill manage; you'll see! I have had to do it before. Ve vill shift ve orchestra if necessary. At the Elysium, I have seen vem place a special stage at a moment's notice. Also at ve Capua and other cabaret shows. You vill see!"

Herbert acknowledged himself beaten, and Shishkin went on.

"Besides, I vant a platform for ve second piece I have fought out for you. Impossible to perform vivout a stage effect. And now ve vill get to vork on vis second piece."

"Right-O!" said Herbert, all attention.

Stumpy thought: "If only it pleases my Fritz!"

"What I have fought of is a free interpretation of ve last scene in ve second part of Faust, you remember? Where Mephisto and the uvver devils try to overcome ve angels who are strewing ve roses—vous savez?"

The two young Germans, having been crammed with the beauties of their native literature all the length of their schooldays, naturally were at a loss, but the Russian knew exactly which scene he meant.

Mephistopheles creeps forth from the prompter's

box, and makes a sacrilegious assault upon the heavenly choirs. An angel is keeping watch at the gate, occupied in weaving a coronal of roses. When first the devil appears the angel is petrified with alarm; then he puts himself in a position to defend his trust against the wanton intruder. The devil, laughing maliciously, makes as if to seize the sentinel. The latter eludes the evil one's grasp, flees, wails, beseeches. All in vain. At last the devil has seized the angel and is about to carry off his prize to the infernal regions when, in dire distress, the angel remembers the coronal of roses which at the first assault had fallen in the path. Seizing the flowers, the victim uses them in self-defence. No sooner is the devil touched by the holy blossoms than he writhes in torment, begs for mercy, and crawls back into the hole whence he had at first emerged. The angel, raising the flowers in triumph, sends a prayer of ardent thanksgiving upward towards God's throne.

Herbert looked dubious. He feared his sister was too much of a novice to carry the thing off. But Shishkin pooh-poohed such objections.

"It is just ve fact of her being a bit of a novice which will go to people's heads! All ve world knows woman dans toutes les espèces de raffinement. Beau physique, too, can be seen any evening. What ve are proposing to show vem is somefing quíte new."

They thereupon set to work to practise this number. To the delight of both the men, Stumpy played her part admirably. For the moment, until a suitable angel-robe had been thought out and confectioned, Stumpy made the best of one of Shishkin's nightshirts, shortened by means of a string round the waist. True, a slimmer cherub would have been more suitable to act as sentinel at heaven's gate, but all the same, as both

the onlookers admitted, she looked such a darling so sweet and so innocent elle était à croquer. And when, at length, the wings were added! . . .

Herbert, too, felt he would cut a good figure. He had once before appeared as Lucifer in black silk tights, and all the necessary paraphernalia. His dancing was sure to be adequate to the occasion, and his powers of mimicry did not lag behind his other talents.

Hitherto they had always made use of the gramophone for their practice. One day, however, coming at the usual hour for her lesson, Stumpy found a very fair, very tall, very thin young man sitting at the piano. He contemplated her with hungry eyes which were fringed with white lashes.

The name of this washed-out individual was Herr Weinkauf, as Stumpy learned when he was introduced. He had only just finished his course at some music school or the other, and earned a modest pittance by playing the violin at various cafés. His clothes were frayed at the wrists and shabby, the button-holes of his jacket so widened by hard wear that they looked like three white-lashed eyes staring at you, similar to those other two in the poor youth's face.

While the dance was in progress, accompanied for the last time by the gramophone, Weinkauf assiduously made notes. His playing thereafter was so correct and so sympathetic that Stumpy felt as if wings were growing of their own accord out of her shoulders and making her lightsome as a bird.

Next day he already had the music for the Cruche cassée tidily copied out, and a day or two later the accompaniment to the angel dance was likewise ready. He was to provide a score and the parts for the instrumentalists in a little orchestra. As Shishkin gave him his instructions, Weinkauf bowed his head three or four

times as who should say: "If only this could provide me with a little food!" Stumpy was greatly touched by the young fellow's obvious poverty and resolved to bring him a box of chocolate creams on the morrow.

She was absolutely discountenanced, however, when he turned down her gift, saying:

"I'm ever so sorry, but my digestion is weak and I have not been able to eat chocolates for some years now."

In future, therefore, Stumpy invariably brought double rations for lunch and shared them with him.

He was to get no pay until the dancers were launched, when he, too, would receive a proper salary if they hit the public taste. And of course they would!

The provision of suitable costumes was a ticklish matter. Stumpy still had her last month's salary intact, for she had conveniently "forgotten" to pay her parents for her board—a thing she had never failed to do since she had gone out to work.

One morning a dressmaker presented herself while the dancing-lesson was in progress. Shishkin had engaged her because she was used to theatrical costume making and because she was fairly cheap. The frock for the *Cruche cassée* was to cost eighty marks; the angel-dress no more than fifty. In addition there were the wings to be got and stockings, etc. Herbert was generous enough to announce that if Stumpy's money did not suffice, he himself would make up the deficit.

At last, after many weeks of arduous toil a day came when Shishkin announced:

"Dear children, you may be imagining you are finished dancers? But one is nevaire finished. Still, if you would like to try your fortune, you may do so now."

That very afternoon Herbert went the rounds of the cabarets to see where a vacancy might present itself. No luck! Refusal everywhere!

"Take your little sister along vif you next time," counselled Shishkin. "You'll be very differently received."

"What earthly good shall I be," demanded a very discouraged Stumpy.

For all answer Shishkin and Herbert exchanged an ambiguous smile!

Chapter Twenty-three

AT THE ELYSIUM

A WAITING-ROOM with upholstered benches round the walls. The latter hung with pictures of scantily clothed women, and dancing couples petrified it would seem in contorted attitudes.

At the entrance door, a page-boy in a purple livery had informed Stumpy with a dubious look that the director never saw any one except by appointment. Still, if she'd step inside, he'd try what could be done. . . .

She had then been received by a seedy-looking individual wearing knee-breeches, and silk stockings on his lanky legs. His name appeared to be Herr Rendant, and his simpering smile was obviously meant to put the nervous at their ease.

What? She wanted to see the manager? That was rather a difficult matter to arrange. He might get himself into trouble if he so much as mentioned such a thing. All the same he'd risk it; and meanwhile would the lady and gentleman kindly take a seat?

Herbert and Stumpy had long to wait. Indeed, they despaired of ever being ushered into the great pandrum's sanctum. From time to time some one would come out and hearten them, begging them to have patience for just a little while, and all would be well.

Then, when they least expected it, the inner door opened, and a being emerged who was patently the master and little tin god of the place.

He was a short-legged creature, as broad as he was long. His bullet-head was entirely devoid of hair, and there was no colour in his clayey face except for the dark brown cigar that protruded from his thick, moist lips. Slovenly in dress, he was wearing a shabby dinner jacket, and a crumpled white shirt-front, although it was only three o'clock in the afternoon.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked waddling towards the brother and sister as they stood expectant.

You should have seen how Herbert rose to the occasion! He bowed graciously, but his greeting implied disdain, and the would-be pleasant words that followed were brimful of condescension.

"Of course I must make it clear from the outset that we cannot hope to compete with the notables whose portraits grace these walls. My little sister and I have in mind, rather, a social venture. I feel confident, in view of our extensive social relations, that any place which engages us will be doing very well for itself—will enlarge the circle of its clientèle. Your own reputation will explain why we give you the first offer."

The manager had not removed his cigar when he greeted Stumpy, and Herbert, therefore, produced a gold cigarette case, selected a cigarette, tapped it elegantly on the ruby clasp, and placed it daintily between his lips.

Frowning slightly in perplexity, the manager, apparently taken in by Herbert's bluff, asked:

"Do you happen to be another of these war officers?"

"Von Hartung, ex-flight-lieutenant, at your service," answered Herbert, deftly introducing the "von" as if it were a mere nothing that one might remember or forget at will. "This is my half-sister. Her name for the moment need not enter the discussion."

The manager cast an exploratory glance through half-shut eyes in Stumpy's direction. His manner warmed appreciably as he looked.

"What's your genre?"

"That's precisely what we are here to show you."

"Quite so. They all want to go through their paces. No time now, got another engagement. What about to-morrow?"

"That will suit us all right. In any case we could not try our stuff out to-day; we have neither the music nor the costumes here."

"Floor or platform? You can have your choice."

"If it's perfectly convenient, we'd prefer platform."

"Right. Ask the man to show you the place. Three sharp. Can't afford to be kept waiting."

He nodded in Stumpy's direction, twirled his cigar between his teeth, and waddled away towards the door whence he had come.

Hardly had he vanished, than Herr Rendant, who had all this while been conspicuous by his absence, appeared on the threshold of the opposite entrance.

"You see," he said, speaking exclusively to Stumpy and assuming a most ingratiating manner, "what a few timely words from me can do."

Herbert thanked the man with a nod that put Rendant in his proper place. With effusive amiability, the poor thing went on:

"Come, this way, Sir. With your permission, I shall myself guide you to the hall. Of course it is all in the dark just now. Slip your hand through my arm, my dear young lady, so that your sweet little feet may not stumble over the steps."

He led the way with Stumpy on his arm, and penetrated into a dark entrance lobby.

"Take care! Two steps," he cried, seizing the

chance to slip his arm protectively round Stumpy's waist.

Herbert cleared his throat, warningly, thus giving the fellow to understand that no such liberties were going to be tolerated. Whereat Herr Rendant, resumed his deferential attitude, and felt for the switch. A couple of lights cast a dim illumination over the hall, and Stumpy contemplated the scene of her future activities.

The place for the orchestra was sunk, and behind it was a stage about nine feet in depth with a hooded projection serving as prompter's box. To the rear was a slightly raised platform for the jazz band, with grand piano, desks, and stools all complete. There was ample accommodation for dancing in spite of these many encumbrances. Herbert asked to be shown the dressing-rooms. One for ladies, one for gentlemen, and a third for married couples.

"For you," said Herr Rendant to Stumpy, "and because it is you, I'll see that the dresser comes on time. She'll help you to make up, too. The hairdresser does not get here till much later, in the evening."

Next morning they rehearsed assiduously. The cadaverous musician was given "final instructions" over and over again. Unfortunately Shishkin could not go with them, for he had other pupils awaiting him in the studio.

At last the moment arrived when Stumpy, thanks to the ministrations of the dresser, was transformed into the charming little maid depicted by Greuze, a girl who was hardly more than a child, dreaming her innocent dreams—though the impersonator's pristine innocence had been lost long since!

A copy of the picture itself, purchased from a dealer

in the west end, was propped up on the dressing-table. Stumpy's hair was arranged to correspond exactly with the original, but her fichu was draped so as to show somewhat more bosom. In spite of her protests she was overruled in this matter, and had to submit accordingly.

Hardly was she ready, when a harsh bell sounded, and almost simultaneously three o'clock struck from a neighbouring tower.

"Quick, quick, quick, you'll make a bad start if you keep him waiting," urged the dresser, a kindly creature, thrusting the pitcher into Stumpy's hands.

Sounds of piano-playing reached her as she hurried on to the stage.

The auditorium was dark, as it had been yesterday, but here and there a shaded light penetrated the gloom.

From very high up, the beam of a projector was thrown upon her, blinding and pitiless.

Let's see, now, what was she to start with? Ah, yes! Glide left . . . advance right to fourth position . . . rise on toes . . . five *chassés* . . . stop . . . repeat backwards . . . mime anxiety . . . increasing anxiety . . . grasp pitcher tightly . . . glide forward . . . pirouette . . . *un, deux, trois*, . . . a despairing glance around and along the whole length of the boxes right and left.

There! The introduction done at last! But, oh, how difficult it all seemed to Stumpy.

In the wings, a delectable creature was standing, clad in white satin breeches and lace jabot. Brother Herbert! His cheeks delicately tinted, powdered hair, bouquet in hand. He looked far less disdainful than usual. Quite the contrary—*un, deux, trois*—he was more like a painted doll than a man.

Now he should make his entry.

Yes, here he was, coming towards her.

Fright, anxiety, horror, surprise, hope—un, deux, trois—un deux trois. . . .

What a blessing no longer to occupy the stage alone!

Everything seemed easy thenceforward, for Herbert was there to take the initiative. She did not need to count any more. Indeed, she did not need to bother her head about time. The white-eyelashed young man at the piano saw to that.

How comfortable it felt to lie in Herbert's arms. Nothing more to do at all. Only look happy. Head thrown back. Lips apart. Melting eyes. . . .

Why did that hateful Dr. Shadow come into her mind just now, worrying her? Horrible!

A little stretch of the imagination, and one might be lying in Fritz's arms. . . .

Attention! She must not miss her cue at the clap of thunder.

The tones issuing from the piano became increasingly jubilant; the pursuit more persistent.

Boom!

Her pitcher lay shattered on the ground. Shattered to fragments. Still, there was a handle left intact, and a fairly big piece attached. That would suffice, in the final tableau, to recall the original picture.

Followed hesitation, dreamy questioning, the giving of oneself for all eternity—Fritz, dear Fritz! She must not forget to sink very slowly to the ground when she stooped to pick up what remained of the broken pot. Herbert was kissing his hand . . . he disappeared into the wings . . . she gradually returned to the world of reality, and fell into the bewitching pose of the Greuze picture.

Yes, Shishkin proved right. There was no need

for her to move until the sound of applause should rise from the auditorium.

True, it was very thin, this clapping—but then there were only about four pairs of hands to produce any sound at all.

Even the manager had brought his fat palms together a couple of times. To have achieved that was certainly a feather in Stumpy's cap.

"Change," came in stentorian tones from the rear.

Ah, true, there was a second item to follow. She had almost forgotten.

"You'll do, if the next number is as good as the first," exclaimed the dresser.

Quick! Off with the Greuze dress, down with the hair. No need to make up afresh. Of course the traditional angel has long, flowing locks. But that looks ugly when one dances. Draw the hair down over the ears, clap a wreath round to keep it in place. Hitch up the dress to show the legs—for angels have always been privileged in this matter. Where on earth are the clips for the wings? Ah, here, at last!

Now the roses. If she got engaged she'd have real roses, fresh every evening. Her admirers would see to that.

That hateful bell!

No time to waste!

The stage was differently set, a piece had been added at the back, near where the saxophonist sat. Herbert must have seen to the matter while she was dressing. The prompter's box had been replaced by a dark pit.

She was to take her place on the topmost step. But how could she do that? There was no curtain to shield her movement from the public eye!

Shiskin had forgotten this detail!

The pianist, seeing her standing at a loss what to do, gesticulated despairingly, for Herbert had to make his entry during the very first bar of the music.

"What are you waiting for?" demanded a petulant voice from the body of the hall.

Courage! Forward march! Up the steps!

The music started. The roses lay in her lap. From out the dark abyss in the foreground appeared a red capped head with a pair of devil's horns.

Now everything went as on oiled wheels. Herbert was positively terrifying in his Lucifer dress. Black tights with red tongues of flame creeping upwards over his legs and body. Each finger was adorned with a long pointed nail. And his face! Never had Stumpy seen a more grisly visage.

But from the very fact that Herbert looked his part so amazingly, Stumpy found she could no longer simply imitate fear—she was, in very truth, almost paralysed with terror. She fled from him, she implored his mercy, she seized upon the roses which were to prove her salvation, precisely as if the devil himself were pursuing her. When at last the evil one betook himself to his abode of fire, Stumpy felt so relieved that the hymn of thanksgiving which rose from her heart was a genuine expression of her emotions.

The combat, however, had not only been fought out between the angel and the devil. Our poor musician's heart, too, was a veritable battle-ground. Luckily for the performers he was excellent at improvisation, otherwise the music arranged beforehand would have corresponded in no way to the figures of the dance as now performed.

Still, thanks be, this act seemed to have created as good an impression as the first—only—yes, and a very

obvious exception had to be made—there came absolutely not a sound of applause from the auditorium.

Then the manager's voice reached Stumpy's ears from a great distance, and his tone was not altogether reassuring:

"As soon as you have changed come along to my office."

The dresser, however, appeared to be quite as enthusiastic—but that kind of thing might very well be merely part of her profession.

Herbert had not a smile or a word of pleasant greeting for her when they met in the passage. He puffed a long stream of cigarette smoke into the air, and said grumpily:

"Come on!" Nothing more.

Now the two of them were standing before the manager's writing-table, which was laden with the autographed photos of various notables in the world of art. The magnate himself was smoking one of his redoubtable cigars.

Deep armchairs invited you to rest, but the brother and sister could not think at this moment of yielding to such a lure.

"I guess you two have just come from a ladies' seminary, eh?" were the words with which the manager began negotiations.

Herbert, quickly perceiving which way the wind blew, turned to Stumpy, and said with calm deliberation:

"Better make yourself comfortable, my dear."

He handed her to one of the ample easy chairs, flung himself into another, and asked nonchalantly:

"A ladies' seminary? I am afraid I don't quite catch your meaning."

The manager did not seem to take Herbert's off-hand tone amiss, for he answered quite amiably:

"I've nothing against your first number. P'raps a leetle too fine for the clientèle at my place. Would do nicely as an interlude in a cinema show. But that second number! What bee could have been in your bonnet to make you think that's any good for my bill? First mistake: it's a religious subject. Angels, devils—I simply don't know what to do with such things, I assure you. Besides, and this is really the crucial point of the matter, the second number must invariably present the audience with something in the nude. Cultured people like to call it 'classical' dancing: ordinary people, speaking more plainly, call it 'nude' dancing. They really mean the same thing." He turned to Stumpy. "And from what I could see, you don't need to be ashamed of showing your charms—so long as we keep within the limits imposed by police regulations, of course."

Stumpy blushed crimson, and squirmed under the man's appraising stare and the implication behind his words. She looked imploringly towards Herbert, but she felt in her bones that, in this particular matter, he would prove thoroughly unsympathetic.

The manager continued:

"No fault to find with the technique of the second number. In fact, barring the clothes, the whole thing can stay as it is; we'll have to give it another name, that's all." Now he turned to Herbert. "You're not badly built either, young man. Darken your skin to a golden brown, put on some sort of a loin cloth, and there you are! The kid can be rigged out with as little on as possible—just a handkerchief for fig-leaf, you know. Make up her body a pale yellow, and her

eyes slanting—in fact a Mongolian type's the thing, makes her sinuous movements more suggestively attractive. We can christen it Siamese Temple-Dance, or Polynesian something or the other. Quite simple. It'll be a little bit of all right then."

"Excuse me," broke in Herbert, "in that case the music is all wrong, the whole thing will have no earthly meaning."

"What's that you say?" asked the manager excitedly, for once dislodging his cigar. "Meaning? It's to have a meaning? But my dear man you make me doubt if you have even learned the a.b.c. of art! I suppose you'll next be asking to have the orchestra change its place so's to give you a prettier background, eh?"

"Of course," said Herbert quietly.

"Can't be done, my good fellow, can't be done. Why, that would deprive me of the room for half a dozen paying tables, and who is likely to refund me for such a loss I should like to know? All the same, you've come at a fortunate moment for yourselves. I'm just on the look out for a number such as yours. Thirty marks a day, two performances, and a hot supper before you go home. Even Pavlova could not ask for better conditions. Leave the music with me. I'll get it scored for the orchestra. S'soon as that's done, I'll send you word."

"We've had the music orchestrated already," interposed Herbert.

"Very well. Then you can rehearse to-morrow, and start next day."

"That being the case, I'll not be out of order if I ask you for a contract."

The manager cupped his ear in his hand.

"Contract, did you say? We'll see how the public

takes it first. I never draw up contracts until after the first appearance. Give your address in the outer office. Good afternoon."

He touched the bell, and Stumpy and Herbert rose to depart.

Chapter Twenty-four

TWENTY BLUE-TONGUED FLAMES

STUMPY was alone in the street.

Herbert had said:

"You'll only be in the way. There are so many things to arrange. Rehearsals with the orchestra, and all that. Get along home. I'll see to everything."

Gradually, as she stood watching the crowds of pleasure seekers going on their way to a *thé dansant* here, or some other amusement there, Stumpy gathered her wits about her, and left the land of dreams wherein her mind had wandered aimlessly this hour past. She had been placidly allowing others to decide her fate, just as if the matter was no concern of hers.

Now, with night coming on apace and darkness creeping in around her, she suddenly understood quite clearly and definitely what was being demanded of her.

She was to appear almost completely naked, that's what it amounted to, before a crowd, like so many others whose lot she had commiserated when Herr Gerberding had taken her the round of the cabarets. The sight of these poor mortals had sent a shudder down her back, and she pitied them as strange creatures knowing nothing of shame.

Hitherto she had thought of herself as one of the company of artists who, hailing from distinguished circles, were indeed forced by poverty to earn a livelihood, but had no occasion to pander to the lusts of humanity. She had envisaged the possibility that her

success would react favourably upon Fritz—would overcome the disdain he had conceived against her, and would bring him to her side once more. Now she saw herself thrust into a fetid abyss whence she could never hope to emerge into the pure light of day.

She had planned to have a special invitation dispatched to him so that he might be present at her début, an invitation that should be addressed anonymously, though in her own handwriting, to "Herr von Nadolny and Friend." Then he could bring along Fräulein Elinor Schmitz if he chose. She wanted even her enemy to witness her triumph! And now? The whole business must be kept from his knowledge with anxious care. Never, if she could help it, should he come to know of this fresh humiliation.

Of course she realised that, even if Gudrun did not give the show away, some unhappy chance might well bring him to the Elysium any evening Fräulein Elinor wished for a spree.

Then, everything would indeed be lost.

Well, in any case all her fresh young hopes of the last few weeks had been crushed. Never now would she be able to go up to him and, with modest pride, say to him:

"This is what I have been able to make out of your little Stumpy."

Never now!

And yet? Wait a bit. Was there not even in this black hour a loophole of escape? Surely she could take him into her confidence, ask him counsel and advice, make his judgment decisive as to her future activities? She would abide by his verdict. Would not such a course prove her salvation?

Stumpy paced the streets a prey to uncertainty. More and more it became clear to her that she must

see Fritz, talk the matter over with him, must find out what he thought she should do. If he said "No," then nothing would induce her to go against his wishes.

Should she wait about for him? How often this same question had risen to her mind of late! But she had invariably shrunk from the ordeal. She could not face the possibility of his cutting her dead. That would be too horrible.

Should she write to him? No point in doing that, seeing that even Gudrun, usually so successful in all her undertakings, had never managed a second interview with Fritz. At least, so it would appear, if any confidence was to be placed in Gudrun's reports. Still, whether Gudrun had been telling the truth or not, Stumpy's present dilemma could brook no delay. She must ask her sister's advice.

Stumpy, therefore, turned homeward, having at last made up her mind as to her next step. She awaited her sister in their room, to make sure of a private talk.

Half-past six. No Gudrun yet. She would not be long now. Ah, here she was! But so distraught, so stand-offish, in such a hurry to be gone. She asked in a desultory manner about the rehearsal, and hardly seemed to listen while Stumpy gave a short account of the happenings of that afternoon.

"I say, Gudrun, I do wish you'd attend to business a bit, there's something special I want you to do for me."

"What, again, so soon?"

"You told me Fritz had said he wanted to meet you once more, and he's never managed it up till now. Well, I'm in urgent need of his advice, as one friend to another, you know, nothing about love and such. Of course I could write, but that's no good I'm afraid. As soon as he recognised my handwriting he'd fling

the letter away. Couldn't you send him a line? Tell him what I'm thinking of doing—say I want to talk things over with him—nothing about love, Gudrun darling—and then . . . and then . . . oh, pester him until he says Yes. . . .”

“It's extremely doubtful if he'll ever do that,” answered Gudrun, looking through Stumpy into the void, as she so often did nowadays.

“Oh, darling, you are so clever,” said the younger girl coaxingly. “Whatever you set your heart on you can do. You see if you won't pull this off too! Dear, darling Gudrun, please, please have a try.”

Gudrun looked to right and to left as if seeking an exit from a trap. Then, shrugging her shoulders, as was her way when cornered, she said dubiously:

“Of course one can always have a try.”

“Now? At once? Say yes.”

“Very well, I'll write the letter now.”

“I'll run and post it before supper.”

“No, don't bother. I've got to go out again, and can take it along then.”

“But I should so love to have posted it myself.”

“Why on earth should you, seeing that I have to go out anyhow?”

Stumpy felt there was no more to be said, though she would have given much to be allowed to hold the letter that was so soon to be held by Fritz.

Ten minutes later Gudrun came back to the bedroom, and, going to the cupboard took out her hat and coat. Stumpy went with her to the front-door.

“Will you be back to supper?”

“Can't tell,” answered Gudrun over her shoulder as she opened the front door. “You might keep some for me, there's a dear.”

Then she remembered that she had left her keys on

the dressing-table upstairs: She hastily deposited her umbrella and bag on the hall stand and ran to fetch them.

"I'll be able to have a look at the envelope after all," thought Stumpy, opening her sister's bag and peeping in.

But although there was an assortment of miscellanea, Stumpy saw no sign of a letter. Where could her sister have put it?

She laid the bag back on the stand, and as she did so she noticed a peculiar clinking sound, as of keys. Yes, they were certainly keys—and yet Gudrun had run upstairs to fetch hers. What keys, then, could these well be? A horrible suspicion took possession of Stumpy. Again she opened the bag and looked in. There, at the very bottom, was a pair of keys on a ring, ah, how well Stumpy knew where they belonged! Six weeks ago she had handed them to Gudrun with a bleeding heart. No mistake was possible. Stumpy would know that pair on their broken ring among thousands of other keys. Wild thoughts coursed through her brain. If, at that first visit, Gudrun had not given up the keys . . . why then . . . she had become Stumpy's successor, with freedom to come and go when she pleased . . .

But, if her surmise was correct, it meant . . . ? No, no, such an idea was impossible. All Stumpy's world would fall about her ears should her suspicions be confirmed. Honour, justice, trust, love—shattered?

She continued to stare at the tell-tale keys. There was a rustle behind her. She turned. There was Gudrun coming from their bedroom with her own keys in her hand. One look sufficed to inform her what had taken place during her absence. She smiled, and said:

"Little spy!"

Stumpy was speechless. All she could do was to hold out the symbols of Gudrun's betrayal, a world of accusation in her eyes. The elder girl snatched at the keys, but Stumpy was too quick for her.

"They're mine," she cried.

Still Gudrun smiled.

"No, no, they have been handed over to me. And, since I'm responsible for them, I'll ask you to be so good as to give them up. Anyway they're no earthly use to you now."

Her triumphant tone far more than the actual words, told Stumpy that all hope of a future reconciliation with Fritz was shattered.

"You horrible, common beast," she cried, throwing down the keys.

She made straight for the privacy of her bedroom, flung herself on her bed, and buried her face in the pillows.

Oh, if she might never see or hear anything ever again; just die, now!

How long she lay thus she knew not, but after a while she heard the door softly open and the sound of her sister's footsteps, tiptoeing across the carpet towards her.

Then all was still again. Gudrun must be standing quite close, looking down at the prostrate figure. Stumpy felt incapable of movement, even if a dagger were to be plunged into her back.

After what seemed an eternity, Gudrun's voice reached her ears:

"Seems to me we'd better have a heart-to-heart talk."

Stumpy did not move.

A hand gripped her shoulder. It was as painful as

any dagger thrust could have been to the despairing girl. Knowing she could not shake off the hateful impact so long as she lay still, Stumpy suddenly got up and turned to face her betrayer. She would look again into those horrible, smiling eyes.

And yet—what had happened? The eyes were no longer horrible. They shone down at her, full of compassion. Well might Gudrun afford herself the luxury of compassion, now that she had gained everything there was to gain after sacrificing her own little sister!

"I'm sorry, Stumpy, for being so unkind just now. But really, you know, it was pretty awful catching you in the act. Spying on other people's private life isn't done."

"Maybe," answered Stumpy. "But neither is it considered quite the thing for a decent, self-respecting girl to go and steal another girl's friend—especially when she is a sister."

She struck out violently, and Gudrun had all the difficulty in the world to avoid the blow. Matters looked sadly as if the two girls were going to come to fisticuffs. They had often settled their disputes thus in their childhood—but those days were so far off. . . .

As luck would have it, however, at this moment, a latchkey sounded in the front door. Papa and Mamma were coming in.

"Quick, pull yourself together," commanded Gudrun. "And mind you behave at supper as if nothing had happened."

As if nothing had happened!

There sat Stumpy now, stuffing down baked potatoes and sausage as best she could, while endless pictures of death and destruction coursed through her brain. Lysol—a leap into the canal—head in oven and turn

on the gas. There was the geyser in the bathroom. The jets swivelled out for you to light them. You put a match to them and, immediately, twenty blue flames sprang up into the air.

But if you did not strike a match, the gas would come through the jets all the same.

Merely bring your bedding and make yourself comfortable for the night on the floor, turn on the gas, and softly, quietly fall asleep.

Papa and Mamma showed a perfectly natural curiosity to know how the trials had gone, and Stumpy, nothing loath, told them all about the dances, though she was careful not to breathe a word about the "toute nue" turn. Indeed, she resolved to keep a quiet tongue in her head concerning that final interview with the manager, and details he had insisted on in regard to her first appearance.

Supposing, that is to say, this "first appearance" ever took place!

And again the whirling of thoughts went spinning through her head—death, revenge—death, revenge!

In an effectively offhand manner she begged Mamma to allow her to make up a bed on the sofa. She slept badly just now, and as soon as ever she lay awake an irresistible desire to practise her steps would seize her. Of course she could not indulge this desire lest she disturb Gudrun. . . .

The latter pricked up her ears, but breathed not a syllable. She had instantly understood that, after what had taken place, Stumpy refused to share a room any longer.

As soon as Stumpy was alone, and the others were safely in their beds (Herbert had not come home yet), she got up, dressed, and noiselessly let herself out by the front door. She had no plan. Just wanted to get

away from the narrow walls of her home, whose atmosphere seemed suffocating. She wandered aimlessly about the streets. One o'clock struck; the town was dark, deserted. . . . Only the Kurfurstendamm was still lighted, and from a distance Stumpy could see the taxis in a long row waiting for belated fares. Once or twice a loiterer made as if to accost her, but she walked too fast for any to catch her up.

At length in the course of her wanderings she came upon Savignyplatz. Here she had met Fritz for the first time. She went over to the halt where, on that afternoon so long ago it seemed, she had passed and repassed him as she walked up and down, and he had hesitated to speak to her. Now she reacted the scene so vividly that for a moment she actually saw him at her side.

She decided to make short tracks for his house. What cared she for his prohibition and strictures? What if he should cut her dead? She snapped her fingers at everything. Maybe he had been spending the evening with Elinor, had danced with her, would be coming back late. . . .

But he did not come. Hours sped away, but he did not come. Perhaps he was at home.

"Oh, why didn't I stick to the keys?" she cried to herself. "If I had them now I would go up and see him."

Then the thought flashed through her mind that Gudrun might be doing what she, Stumpy, had never been allowed to do—though, in her great joy one night, she had taken the law into her own hands, it is true—perhaps Gudrun was with him now. Filled with disgust and horror, Stumpy turned away. The place had of a sudden become abominable to her.

Up the street, down that other, knowing neither

where she went or why, Stumpy went on her way, distraught. A man called to her, she heeded him not; a second walked at her side for a while but when he received no answer to his questions and his chatter, he gave up the game as hopeless.

She stood on the bank of the canal. A thin haze rose from the water. Unfortunately it was not dense enough to mask the dark and unsavoury depths in which, had the water been clean, it would have been such a pleasure to drown.

No! Not that, not that! Anyway not yet awhile. There were still a few things to be done here below. He must know first of all to what a pass she had come now that he had refused any longer to act as her protector. . . .

She did not want to dance naked? And why not, pray? On the contrary, she'd dance without a single unnecessary stitch to her back. See if she wouldn't! Shamelessly naked, so that people would shake their silly heads and say: "Poor kid! What a pity! So young, and already so corrupt!"

He'd hear, he would be made to hear. Perhaps then his conscience might prick him!

And that wasn't all. She had another trump in her hand. But she would not play it until the time was ripe.

Often when Herbert came home late, he would take a hot bath before turning in. One could hear him splashing if one happened to wake up. Well, he was not the only one who could indulge in a late bath. Plenty of excuses, too. After the excitement of that first appearance, it would calm the nerves before sleep. Herbert would be kind and forgo his refreshing plunge on such a unique occasion in his little sister's life.

And then? And then?

The answer was furnished by the twenty jets of blue flame rising from the geyser floor. They took up a merry dance in Stumpy's brain.

But if her scheme were successful, then no blue flames would spring up at all. Quite otherwise. No match must be allowed to approach those precious jets once the gas was turned on.

But what's this? The blue flames are already there, do what she will to extinguish them! They turn summersaults in her brain, they spring into the air; whichever way she looks, they leap and fly and dance; the sky is full of the circling, blue-tongued flames.

The slimy depths of the canal disappeared behind this whirling circlet of light. At the best the murky waters had not offered an enticing end to her miseries, any more than the draught of lysol she had thought of earlier in the evening. Veronal? The chemists would only supply that on a doctor's prescription. . . . No, among all the possible means for bringing about a speedy and comfortable death, none smiled so alluringly as those twenty jets. . . .

Calmed at last by the decision, Stumpy went quietly home. As she crept between the sheets, it seemed to her as if some one had just presented her with a very beautiful gift.

Oh, how difficult it was to get up that morning! Lina stood there admonishing, pulling at the bed-clothes, insisting that Master and Mistress would be wanting their breakfast soon and the room simply must be tidied and aired . . .

Stumpy dragged her tired limbs from the sofa, and made for her bedroom. She'd keep strictly to her own side, would turn her back resolutely on Gudrun.

But she went to the bathroom first, and here she found that Lina had already lighted the geyser; at sight of the blue flames a macabre feeling arose in Stumpy's heart. It seemed to her as if she stood in the very presence of death.

Well, in the end, she would have to go to her bedroom, were it merely to comb and brush her hair! She had meant to ignore Gudrun entirely, not to address a single word to her. But the elder sister looked kindly at the younger, and behaved just as if nothing untoward had happened the previous evening. So what could Stumpy do but answer Gudrun's good-morning, and carry on as usual? Besides, what did it matter anyway? The day of vengeance would soon come!

Herbert's tap at the door surprised her still only half-dressed.

He urged her to make all possible speed, for Shishkin was expecting them for rehearsal, when the necessary changes in the dances would be made. In the afternoon they'd have to be punctual at the hall, for the rehearsal with the orchestra.

A fiendish joy took possession of her as she thought triumphantly: "Carry on; you'll see in the end what comes of it all!"

Shishkin wrung his hands in despair and indignation. His finest work was to be destroyed, his charming angel was to be caricatured and desecrated.

Yet he agreed that "what the public wants" is as much nakedness as it can get!

"They talk of beauty; but what it really amounts to is sex appeal," he wailed. "Any art which has not sex appeal behind it can find no patrons nowadays."

The emaciated young musician at the piano smiled sardonically, for he, too, was tortured by the same avid desires. At the moment, he was, apparently, oc-

cupied in trying to remember what he could of the music for the two dances, his score having been ruthlessly taken away and handed over to the orchestra for practice. As she looked at him Stumpy could not suppress a pang of remorse at the thought that this poor young man no less than Shishkin was relying upon her success for the reward his labours had earned him. And she was preparing to betray his hopes . . .

It proved easier than might have been supposed to change the character of the dance. One might well have fancied that it had always been arranged thus from the outset. Let us all look forward with the best of hopes.

That afternoon, they had their one and only rehearsal at the cabaret, for the leader of the orchestra had set to work with a will, and had drilled his men to perfection. The music for the second dance had been successfully converted, by means of an ingenious use of drums, into something with a decidedly oriental flavour. Stumpy was allowed to retain her clothes during rehearsal, for the pocket-handkerchief garment the manager had ordered proved vastly too big and had to be sent back to the dressmaker to be curtailed!

For the nonce, the item had been entitled "Siamese Temple-Dance," and it would probably retain this name although, as some one pointed out, in the country of its putative origin no women would ever dream of dancing in primitive nakedness. On the contrary, they invariably wore the richest and stiffest of brocades.

The first appearance of this new couple was, in accordance with the manager's express desire, to be kept a secret. They were to be a surprise item. Later on, having made their début, they were to go by the name of "The Debucourts"—heaven alone knew where the name had been unearthed!

Herbert drew Stumpy's attention to the fact that her name had already been scribbled, in pencil, on the evening's program—in one of the best places too.

Some of these programs were lying on a table, and Stumpy begged for a couple from Herr Rendant who was only too pleased to oblige.

Towards five o'clock they were free.

Time for the afternoon performance to begin. The visitors were simple folk and not very numerous, so that the attendants were wont jocularly to remark that the affair was more like an afternoon-tea party than a night-club show.

Stumpy had been told that she would not have to appear till the second performance. The manager wanted to see the effect produced upon his more exacting customers first. If she did not succeed in pleasing these, she would certainly not be engaged.

As soon as Stumpy reached home, she sat down at her desk, took out the two programs Herr Rendant had given her, and, among the other artists' names, between the appearance of "Mademoiselle Olala; the musical clown," and a couple of "Andalusian gypsies," she wrote:

The Debucourts in Dancing Fantasies

(a) La cruche cassée

(b) Siamese Temple-Dance

Turning to the front page she further wrote: "Herr von Nadolny is invited to attend to-morrow night's performance, when the Debucourts will make their début."

How could Fritz fail to recognise her handwriting? Surely he would come, if for no other reason than to gratify a very reasonable curiosity.

With him, of course, Fräulein Elinor, to whom the second program was addressed. . . .

By six o'clock that same evening both envelopes had already been posted. As Stumpy dropped them into the letter box, around its blue opening she saw an aureole of twenty blue-tongued flames. . . .

Chapter Twenty-five

THE SIAMESE TEMPLE-DANCE

THE Cruche cassée turn was over, and it had been a great success.

When it was finished, there was silence for a few seconds. Then, from different parts of the hall, came murmurs of approval and astonishment: "Splendid!" "How perfectly sweet!" "Exactly like the picture." Then the clapping began, rising to a storm of applause threatening to sweep the performer off her feet.

She stood there as if paralysed, and all the while the acclamations grew more frantic.

A voice came to her from behind: "Step forward! Step forward! Make your acknowledgments!"

She curtseyed once, twice, thrice—and these curtseys were much more in keeping than bows would have been. Then she fled into the protecting twilight of the wings.

Herbert was standing there. Taking her by the hand, he led her back on the stage.

There were fresh outbursts of applause.

Now she found courage to bow, just as her brother was doing. She was even able to send a glance over the audience in search of Fritz, but could see nothing except open mouths and clapping hands.

She felt much as she had felt that day when Herbert had conjured the extemporised dance out of her limbs. But now the feeling was stronger, was one of a more urgent self-satisfaction, one of having satisfactorily discharged a debt.

Then the projectors were extinguished, and the orchestra began to play, so that the guests could go on dancing while she was changing.

She was back in the dressing-room, in the glare of the lamps, and inhaling the reek of hot curling tongs and cosmetics.

To the right was one of the Andalusian gypsies, to the left the other, and in front of her "Mademoiselle Olala," the female clown, just putting on her breeches.

"Well, my dear," said the Andalusian on her right, drawing a black love-lock forward across one of her temples and plastering it cutely at the corner of her eye, "you seem to have pulled it off pretty well!"

The Andalusian on the left chimed in: "Yes, but the public is a perfect beast. Best make your hay while the sun shines!"

"You'd better hurry up and change, Fräulein!" said the dresser, interrupting.

Suiting the action to the words, this "dresser" played the part of "undresser," swiftly stripping off Stumpy's garments till she stood there mother naked.

"A fat and tender little quail!" exclaimed the Andalusian on the right, looking Stumpy up and down with the eyes of a connoisseur.

Her sister gypsy laughed approvingly at the quip, and capped it with: "I wonder who will gobble up the savoury morsel!"

But the female clown, staring at her open mouthed, said: "That's just what my Lotte looked like when she was sixteen!"

"Here you are!" said the dresser, handing Stumpy a flesh coloured band with a small triangle attached to it in one place.

"What am I to do with it?" asked Stumpy.

The other women burst out laughing.

The dresser fastened on the band which was to be the concession to modesty.

There came a knock at the door, and a man's voice called: "Only the hairdresser."

"Come in!" said the dresser.

Stumpy screamed, and snatched for a garment to cover herself from the eyes of the entering male.

"Don't worry," said the dresser, producing another band with two little bags to shield the breasts. "Here's something extra to hide your charms."

"Besides, my dear little lady," said the hairdresser, a grey headed fellow with lustful eyes who had already helped her to make up for the *Cruche cassée*, "you are dressed as if for one of the court balls of the old days. If I were you, I should be content with my present rig-out, and should not wear that nun's robe!"

He pointed towards a fragment of chiffon—"the handkerchief" of which the director had spoken—now being held out to her by the dresser.

So there really was something more to wear—she had forgotten. But when it had been put on, it came only a very little way down the thighs, and it was split up at the sides, so that at every moment it revealed what it pretended to conceal.

"Oh, if Fritz sees me like this!" was the thought which flashed through her mind, to be followed instantly by the thought of the bathroom and the twenty blue-tongued flames. This latter thought, indeed, was continually coming back to her, for a self-sought death seemed her only refuge.

Meanwhile the hairdresser was plying a paintbrush busily. Up and down, from side to side, it moved over her skin. Then the pigment was rubbed in by two shameless male hands.

"Where's the wig?" asked the hairdresser, having

finished the tinting of the skin. This was raven black and curly. As soon as it had been put on, her cheeks and forehead were pencilled with a sticky yellow composition.

"Now for the eyes," said the hairdresser, pencilling these in turn with dark blue. In three or four seconds the make-up was finished.

"Now go and look at yourself in the glass!"

"But that's not me at all!" cried Stumpy, whereat the others burst out laughing.

Certainly she did not look in the least like Stumpy. An unknown, nude woman, as yellow as a lemon, with long slits for eyes, and a huge crop of black hair looking like a turban, stared back at her from the mirror.

But there was no time for wondering self-contemplation. The call bell was ringing urgently.

As she walked out of the dressing-room she thought: "After all, he won't recognise me, he won't know who it is!" But the falsetto voice of the announcer, a womanish fellow who was walking mincingly up and down the stage, soon tore this last shred of hope away from her.

"If, ladies and gentlemen, when you saw the Cruche cassée you were overwhelmed with admiration at the sight of beautiful virtue, you will now see what this virtue can bestow when it has bashfully unclothed itself."

There was no time for her to stand shivering on the brink, for the drum was already heralding her entry.

"Your roses!" said a voice beside her.

True, she had almost forgotten them! The flowers were soft and cool as she took them in her arms.

"They're real ones to-day," she thought. Herbert had got them for her.

"Boom, boom, boom!"

Slowly, slowly, she walked onto the stage, and mounted the two steps to the scene waiting for her.

Slowly, very slowly, as Herr Shishkin had taught her, she sat down.

Then, while she clutched the roses to her bosom, there climbed out of the black hole in the front of the stage, not the red clothed devil of the rehearsals, but a naked man, brown skinned and shining with oil, muscularly built, and with a huge bush of hair.

That wasn't Herbert! It was a stranger, a naked stranger, who would strangle her as soon as look at her.

Involuntarily she dropped her roses, and the hunt began, the chase for life and death.

She had almost forgotten her cue, for it was as if she had to struggle for freedom in real earnest.

But now he grips her fast. She throws herself on her knees in front of him, stretching up her arms in supplication. At one and the same time, she clings to him and thrusts him away. How horribly greasy his skin feels! Then comes the hardest thing of all, the desperate struggle to avert the inevitable end.

He lifts her high in the air, and then thrusts her down onto the ground. She is his defenceless prey. But she still has the strength to crawl—to crawl or wriggle backwards onto the lower step. Slowly, slowly, she does this, while he, in unsuspecting triumph, maintains his grip on her.

"Fritz, darling Fritz, can I manage it? If, without his noticing, I stretch out my left hand and reach the nearest of the roses, then I shall be able to escape!"

She has one of the roses, and throws it at him.

"Ha, ha, you horror! That touch makes you shud-

der! Well, here are more, and more, and more roses! That touches you to the quick!"

"Boom, boom, boom!" goes the drum, just as at the beginning. This time it is to show that the end is coming.

The assailant has shrunk away, and is slinking back into the dark hole.

She throws the last of the roses after him as he disappears.

Now comes the prayer of thanksgiving.

She looks heavenward. She stretches her arms heavenward, straining upward on tiptoe as if she would fly heavenward were she but able.

"What? Where am I? What are they all shouting about? Ah, shouts of applause. They are applauding me! Then we shall be engaged here. So it's all right, thanks be!"

Then, suddenly, as her eyes strain hither and thither over the enthusiastic audience, amid the gaping mouths and the clapping hands, two burning eyes arrest her attention, and her own gaze becomes fixed.

Those eyes burn, as they had burned that day at Herr Samuel's.

"Fritz, dear, dear Fritz!"

As she stretches her arms towards him, she finds that her legs will no longer support the weight of her body, and she sinks onto her knees. There she kneels upon the stage, both hands covering her eyes, as she does her utmost to avoid bursting into tears.

The audience seems to think that this last gesture is part of the turn, and a pretty part, for the deafening applause continues.

If she could only pull herself together, and get away from the stage!

A hand grips her encouragingly by the arm, and raises her to her feet. It is Herbert, of course, still in the form of the reddish-brown monster, but no longer the would-be ravisher as he bows composedly in response to the applause. All are clapping, all are clapping—save one who stands with his arms gripping the back of a chair, and staring at her inertly.

"Why does he not applaud? Why does he stare at me like that?"

Again the twenty blue-tongued flames leap menacingly before her eyes.

But Herbert's arm draws her into the wings, then back again onto the stage, then into the wings once more, in a succession which seems unending.

At length she finds herself sitting once more in front of the mirror in the dressing-room, beneath the glaring lights, while the dresser is washing off her make-up with some solvent fluid.

The Andalusian gypsies and the female clown have disappeared.

Again and again there is a knocking at the door, and again and again the dresser calls out: "Wait a minute, please!"

Now Stumpy is partly dressed, so that her image in the mirror, the girlish figure in camiknickers, seems to her something like the Stumpy she has known of old.

Then there comes an imperative voice outside the door, saying: "The Manager!"

To him admittance cannot be denied, so the dresser hastens to the door and draws back the bolt. The man of might waddles in. For this once, he is not smoking a thick black cigar, and his fat face looks as smooth as a pumpkin.

Stumpy's shift is cut very low, so she crosses her

hands in front of her breasts and looks up at the intruder overcome with shame.

"You needn't make any bones about it, little girl," says he. "I was looking at you just now with much less on than this. Well, you know, your goods are not really the right ones for my shop window; but still, as I've just told your brother, I won't stand on ceremony, but am ready to sign a contract right away. Of course you're still under age, so your father must enter into the contract for you. How will that suit your book?"

"I don't know," said Stumpy falteringly, for she had barely understood.

"Oh, well, you're only a kid, so you can hardly be expected to know! When your brother has turned himself back into an ordinary human being, we'll go into the question again."

Turning on his heel, he waddled out of the room.

He left the door open, and through the doorway there pushed three or four people who had been waiting impatiently outside. The accountant, two waiters, and a barmaid carrying flowers.

The accountant only wanted to chatter, that was plain. But the waiters presented her with half a dozen visiting cards; and the barmaid, ogling and whispering, said that Stumpy had better give the push to the gentlemen who had sent in cards, for she herself was commissioned by someone of distinction, a real count, who was eager to make the dancer's acquaintance.

Stumpy dropped the cards listlessly, having seen that not one of them bore Fritz's name.

"How could I expect it?" she thought. "There is not so much happiness left on earth!"

To the waiting throng, she said: "Do, please, leave me alone; I want to finish dressing."

Thereupon the dresser hurried them all out of the room, including the barmaid, who was told that her count must wait.

When she was nearly dressed, there was another knock at the door.

"Herbert!" said a familiar voice.

Of course Herbert could come in.

He was now in faultless evening dress, and, as he crossed the threshold, he was smiling in his customary disdainful fashion.

Who could have looked more elegant, more distinguished, than this poor sometime lieutenant, who since the war had been condemned to earn his livelihood as a chauffeur and a dancer?

Putting his arm around Stumpy's shoulders, he kissed her gently on the forehead, and said: "Late as it is, the manager wants to send a messenger for Papa, who will have to sign the contract for you. But I'm not so keen on settling matters to-night, having reasons of my own. You'll be guided by me, won't you?"

Stumpy nodded acquiescence.

Herbert, with the same disdainful smile, drew a sheet of note-paper from his pocket, and handed it to her.

"I've had a funny sort of invitation," said he. "It's from my former betrothed! Lord knows how she comes to be here to-day. But read it for yourself."

Stumpy read as follows: "Dear Herbert, When the show is over, wouldn't you like to come along to my table, where I am celebrating my disengagement? If you were to bring your dear little sister with you, she would find someone who is waiting for her there with ill concealed longing. For my part, I had never found out before how handsome you are! Your unfaithful Elinor."

Where have they sprung from all these blue and red stars which are dancing so strangely before her eyes? Whence arises the singing which fills the air?

Then there was a sudden sound of whimpering, like the whimpering of a litter of puppies, snuggling to their mother's teats. The noise must be coming from her own throat! Nor did Stumpy cease making it till she threw both her arms round Herbert, and began to sob on his shoulder.

Herbert, as always, is a good fellow.

"Hush, hush, darling," he says consolingly. "It will all end happily."

As he finishes speaking, the manager comes back to them, carrying a sheet of manuscript in either hand.

"Look here," he says. "It's just eleven. If one of my chaps hops into a taxi, he could bring your papa back in a few minutes."

"My sister has just told me," says Herbert, "that my step-father is not at home this evening. No use sending for him. I don't care to sign, either, until the other contract can be settled."

"Oh, well, to-morrow morning early will do," said the manager, with a shrug. "So much for that matter; now come along with me to the artists' supper-table."

"What for?" asked Herbert.

"One of the conditions," answered the manager, pointing to the draft contract. "Paragraph Sixteen. Supper when the show is over. Quite a holy sort of place, the artists' supper-room. Round the ceiling is inscribed: 'Little children love one another.' They do love one another, vigorously. Ha! Ha! Ha! Don't misunderstand me, of course. Quite virtuously! But business is business, and you must join in."

"Oh, I know all about that," answered Herbert.

"I've been there before! But we've already been invited to another table!"

The manager took two steps backward, bowed respectfully, and rejoined: "That is another story. Of course the public has the first claim. So long, then, till to-morrow morning!"

He waddled away, laughing as he went.

"Come along," said Herbert, drawing Stumpy's arm within his.

She felt much as if she were going to the scaffold, and nevertheless her heart was full of jubilation.

Four steps down, and into the hall once more. The projectors were at work again, playing on the two Andalusian gypsies, who were giving another turn.

Since all eyes were riveted on this pair, Herbert and Stumpy made their way unnoticed to the table from which Fritz had stared at her during her performance.

He sprang to his feet as she came and stretched forth a hand to her. She clasped it in both hers. She did not speak. She did not even look at him. She was content to hold his hand affectionately, no matter who might be looking at her.

But, indeed, nobody was looking at her. Herbert and Fräulein Elinor Schmitz were as completely wrapped up in one another as were Fritz and Stumpy.

Not until a number of people began angrily to call out "Sit down!" did the two couples become aware that they were blocking their neighbours' view of the performance.

Stumpy sat down on the chair someone pushed under her, and then Fräulein Elinor, who had also sat down, said to her ceremoniously: "Had I known, Fräulein Annemarie, last time you came to see me, that my visitor was so accomplished an artist, I should have ventured to ask you to dance."

Stumpy smiled happily. Fräulein Schmitz, whom she had been inclined to detest, seemed quite agreeable, after all.

Now, as hostess, Elinor introduced the two gentlemen to one another, as follows: "Herr Herbert Hartung, my sometime betrothed—Herr Fritz von Nadolny, my sometime betrothed."

The two young men, naturally somewhat embarrassed, eyed one another suspiciously. Herbert was the first to regain composure. He shook Fritz warmly by the hand, as if renewing a friendship that had lapsed for years.

One word used by Elinor when introducing the two men to one another had rung in Stumpy's brain like a signal bell. "Sometime" betrothed. That was the meaning of the previously incomprehensible "disengagement" in the little note to Herbert.

"He is free, then; he is free!"

But then Gudrun's image flashed into her mind. Gudrun was going about with the keys of Fritz's rooms in her vanity bag. Gudrun was so clever that she had been able to make Fritz break off his engagement, so as to get him for herself.

The twenty blue flames were dancing before poor Stumpy's eyes once more!

But just when despair was again taking possession of her heart, two syllables, whispered so softly that she alone could hear them, were breathed in her ear. "Stumpy!" She did not stir in response, but merely closed her eyes as she thought: "If he calls me 'Stumpy,' all cannot be lost. Perhaps everything will go well after all!"

Some one filled her glass with Champagne. Food was ordered for her. She saw and she listened—without seeing or hearing.

She could think of nothing but this: "He said 'Stumpy.'"

Meanwhile people at the adjoining tables had become aware of her presence. They looked at one another with increasing interest, nudging one another as they did so. Some of them actually stood up to get a better view of her. Vacant places near her were rapidly being filled. It was just as it had been that night of her first unexpected venture into the dancing world.

Pulling herself together, she said to her companion: "I'm afraid it is going to be rather uncomfortable for us here!"

But Elinor answered: "Not a bit of it, dear Fräulein Lüdicke. For my part, I shall be glad for once in a way to bask in the sunshine of fame, even if the fame be another's."

Therewith she turned to Herbert, and resumed an interminable conversation. She scarcely vouchsafed a glance at Fritz, but did not seem out of humour with him. Indeed, she had asked him to order supper, saying with a friendly smile: "You know my taste well enough!"

While Elinor was talking away cheerfully to Herbert, Fritz sat mumchance, and Stumpy thought: "If only he would say a word or two!"

He sat and stared silently into his Champagne glass. Her distress grew more and more unbearable.

What was the matter? Was he tongue-tied because she had appeared nude on this cabaret stage? Was he still angry with her because of the challenging way in which she had spoken to him at Dr. Shadow's? Or was he, after all, in love with Gudrun?

Gudrun! Gudrun! This trouble with Gudrun was the worst of all!

Unable to bear the agony of the thought any longer, she at length plucked up courage to say: "I never told Gudrun that I was going to appear here to-night. Are you so very sorry she has not come?"

He looked at her as if he had not understood her words. Then, having pondered them, he said in amazement: "Why should that make me sorry?"

"Because . . . because . . . because she has been for some time going to your rooms—in my place—in my place."

"Certainly she has been coming to my rooms. But not in your place. No, Stumpy, not in your place."

"She has the keys!"

"Yes, she has the keys. I let her keep them, because she begged me to, and I was glad enough for her to come—for I could never hear enough about you."

At the sound of these words, the twenty blue-tongued flames vanished for ever out of sight, and her mind was filled with happiness and hope and love.

"If I can only keep myself from blubbering with delight," she thought.

In time to save her from disgracing herself like this, the waiter arrived with a roast chicken, which Fritz had ordered because he knew her taste quite as well as Elinor's.

At the sight and the smell of it, she suddenly became aware that she was as hungry as a wolf.

The people at the other tables might stare at her as much as they please, and might throw coloured paper balls at her. She paid no heed, even when these missiles hit their mark, but went on eating unconcernedly until she had stripped the bones of her helping of chicken bare.

But she would not even sip the Champagne. What was happening to her now was far too wonderful for

her to be willing to spoil it by making her head spin with wine.

At length, however, Fräulein Elinor insisted upon her clinking glasses.

"You are a wonderful dancer," she said. "Perhaps I could dance, too, if I tried. But, as I told you, I suffer a good deal from back ache, and that makes it so difficult to practise. What do you think, Herbert? Would you venture to try it with me?"

"Put the thought out of your mind," he answered. "First of all, you don't need to do it; and, secondly, you are far too lazy to take the necessary pains."

Fräulein Elinor laughed merrily.

"What a delight it is," she exclaimed, "to hear the unvarnished truth once more! Fritz is a darling, but he lacks the charm of perfect frankness. Own up, Fritz, you could never have said anything to me like that!"

Then, turning back to Herbert, she went on: "Don't you think that you and I were cast in much the same mould? That we are flesh of one flesh, bone of one bone? Unless I am very much mistaken, you, like me, have a vampire's longing to drain life's cup to the dregs?"

She waved her hand in the S-like curve with which Stumpy was familiar.

She glanced to her left to see what Fritz made of this skirmishing onslaught, to catch him in a sigh of immense relief, such as is made by one from whose spirit a mountain has just been lifted.

When they had finished supper, it was Fräulein Elinor Schmitz who made the first move to depart.

"I never realised that fame could be such a nuisance," said she, as she disentangled a couple of paper coils from her fair hair—for she, likewise, had been

favoured with many such tokens of public attention. "Besides," she went on, "I have no use for love making which does not get anywhere. You are much of the same way of thinking, aren't you, Herbert?"

"That is another way in which the kinship of our spirits has already manifested itself," he rejoined.

Fräulein Elinor burst out laughing, and then, dropping the subject, said: "Please pay the bill for us all, Fritz, and then I'll settle up with you."

Herbert, however, demurred. "We haven't come to that, yet," he said, with his superior smile, and he insisted on paying for himself and Stumpy.

When they got outside, they found that there was a thick fog, one of the famous November fogs of Berlin, in which it is not agreeable to walk the streets by night. And yet Fritz and Stumpy had such a lot to talk to one another about.

Furthermore, they had lagged behind a little, and Herbert and Elinor had suddenly been swallowed up in the obscurity, as quickly as a man overboard at sea is swallowed up by a shark.

Fritz had put his arm round Stumpy, and from time to time she rubbed her cheek against his damp overcoat, as if to make sure that he was still there.

One o'clock struck from a neighbouring church.

"How much time can you spare?" he enquired, with a strange tremor in his voice, wherein too the beloved bugle tone was once more audible.

Stumpy thrilled responsively, as she answered: "Oh, I'm in no hurry to get home yet. The night is still young!"

"Well, we can't go on tramping the streets in this fog," said Fritz. "I don't suppose you have any inclination for turning into a restaurant?"

"Not much!" she answered with conviction.

Half unconsciously, they had directed their footsteps towards Fritz's rooms, and, after a pause, he said, softly and hesitatingly: "Perhaps you will come up for a little while?"

Her answer was straightforward: "Willingly, Fritz, if you want me."

"Yes, I want you," he answered.

Stumpy had not meant quite what Fritz meant by these words, but she understood, and that he should mean what he did was a crowning joy to her this night.

Silently they entered the house together.

Chapter Twenty-six

HERBERT MAKES THE RUNNING

SHE murmured: "Fritz" as she awoke, and then she realised that it was not Fritz but Herbert who had come into the room.

Gradually she understood where she was. She was at home, in the extemporised bed which had been made up for her on the sofa, and the watery November sunlight was glimmering fitfully into the room.

But it was some time before she could remember when and how she had got home.

"Pull yourself together, kid," said Herbert, sitting down on the edge of the sofa. "The man with the contracts may be here any moment, and business hours have begun."

She looked at the clock, and was astonished to see that it was nearly ten.

Then the memories of this night flooded her mind in ardent waves.

But Herbert went on speaking: "I've got something important to talk over with you. Just as if you were a grown-up. And, indeed, you are grown up now. For, when I came home early this morning I glanced in here to see that you were all right, and lo and behold you weren't here at all! It's a good thing that Papa did not catch you when you did get home, but I suppose he was busy in the cellarage."

Stumpy hid her face in the pillow.

"Don't be bashful," said Herbert, "but listen to me. I look upon you as a real sister—always have done—

much more than Gudrun who invariably goes her own way."

Good Lord, Gudrun!

There was the piano, unused, although this was long past the hour when Gudrun began practising as a rule.

"She has gone out," said Herbert, interpreting Stumpy's glance; "and she seemed uneasy about something. I don't know what the devil is up with her! But to come back to our own affairs, those contracts will never be signed, neither by me nor by you (or, rather, for you). Last night will have been our one and only appearance."

"The Lord be praised for that," thought Stumpy. Now that, at long last, she felt herself to be Fritz's property, she did not care a rap for public success.

Then the thought of Herr Shishkin crossed her mind, and also that of the half starved accompanist, who had had nothing as yet beyond a small advance. She asked her brother what they were going to do about these two.

"Don't you worry about them," said Herbert, "or about yourself and me either. It is I who am going to make the great match now. I shall be advanced to the rank of Prince Consort. Instead of your Fritz, I am going to marry Fräulein Elinor."

Stumpy gave a cry of astonishment.

"Yes," Herbert went on, "that is to be the upshot of last night. She has come to see that of all the dowry hunters who have been in pursuit of her, I am the most presentable, the most distinguished looking. I don't wish to say anything derogatory of your Fritz, but you know he really cannot compete with me in that respect! Then of late he has seemed to her such a lame dog (because of you, no doubt) that she's really glad to be quit of him. This morning I want to talk to you about

myself, for you are going to be my only confidant. You know what that means, don't you? You must be able to hold your tongue, even to Fritz, for what I am going to talk to you about is no concern of his."

Stumpy nodded, but this meant as much to her as the most solemn of oaths.

"Well, I've already told you that I was engaged to her a while back, and that she jilted me. She'd been put off by some story or other which the information bureau had ferreted out about me! She thought I wasn't good enough for her. I rubbed her nose in that last night, and insisted on guarantees against a repetition. You know, Stumpy, your Fritz, with his notions of honour, had no more chance against her than a babe in swaddling-clothes; but I am more than her match, and she will strike a snag if she tries to play with me. Indeed, when I saw how completely I had the upper hand of her, I imposed other conditions. You know, of course, that she's had a row with her people? 'Look here, darling,' I said, 'that quarrel is too expensive luxury, for, since you have no communication with them, you may be sure that they are diddling you in some way or other.' And, since I remembered that, by the family settlement, Elinor's husband is to have the right of becoming a partner in the firm, I said to her: 'Unless you agree to my doing that, the marriage is off.' She was quick to realise that this would be good business for her. Now, of course, I should only be a damned fool if I were to go to Soest and make a row there. Far from it! As a modest young man, I should not try to make trouble, but should ask for something to do in the business—high up. I shan't bother much as to what she does with herself. 'S'il vous plait, Madame, look after yourself. I've got my work to do.' Yes, I really want to work, Stumpy.

It's work I've been looking out for ever since the 9th of November, 1918. Naturally, it must be work that pays jolly well. If you offer me a clerk's job at 250 marks a month, I had rather go and dance. Don't make round eyes at me, Stumpy, my dear. I'm simply an up-to-date young man. In the war, I rubbed shoulders with death again and again; and twice since then I've been too near the penitentiary to be pleasant. In these new times, I've been washed in oil of vitriol. To any one who has had such a bath, morality seems nothing more than a fairy tale for children, but all the same, experiences of the kind make one capable and efficient."

He took his gold cigarette case out of his pocket, lighted a cigarette, and then went on: "So much for me, little one. Now let's talk about you. You remember what we agreed. Whichever of us was the first to make a great match was to give the other a helping hand. Well, I had a talk with Elinor about you. It began with talking about Fritz, who, when he and she decided to part brass rags, told her how things stood between you. Now tell me, before we go any further, what have you and he been thinking about your future life together?"

Stumpy felt that she had better be perfectly frank with Herbert.

"Last night he came to a very important decision," she said; "and it was because we had to talk it over in all its bearings, that I got home so late."

"Oh, of course, that sort of thing takes up a lot of time," he agreed, but with a significant grin which brought the blood to her cheeks.

To cover her confusion, she went on hurriedly: "Obviously, he must now give up the hope of buying back Nadolnien. Still, he can't bear the thought of cutting loose altogether from the family estate, so our

plan is to go together and call on Herr Samuel to-day. . . ."

Herbert broke in to remind her that he had not the least idea who Herr Samuel was. When she had told him the whole story, and how it was at Herr Samuel's that she had met Fritz again, he nodded approvingly, but continued to smile in a way which made her uneasy.

"What on earth is in your mind?" she asked anxiously.

"I'll tell you by and by. Go on now, and explain to me what you want to see Herr Samuel for."

"We want to ask him to make Fritz manager of the estate. It would make Fritz happy to be working there, even if someone else were to reap the harvest."

"You surprise me," said Herbert. "I should never have believed that there was such an idealist still left in Germany!"

"Herr Samuel would certainly never be able to find any one more trustworthy than Fritz," Stumpy went on. "He can hardly fail to see that, can he? And Fritz himself says: 'Just because I am so fond of the place, I shall try to get all I can out of it for its owner'!"

"Seems very logical," rejoined Herbert. "But for my part, I should add a rider to the effect 'in order to have something more to put in my own pocket.' That would be my brand of idealism, little Stumpy!"

"I do wish you'd be serious for once," complained Stumpy.

Herbert, complied with a grimace, and said in real earnest: "Your plan is an excellent one, and Herr Samuel will be an idiot if he does not accept Fritz's proposal. But the main question has still to be settled."

Stumpy was all ears, but had no opportunity of

hearing what the main question was, for at this instant the front door bell rang.

"That will be the chap with the contracts," said Herbert. "No need to let him in; I can settle matters at the door."

He went out into the passage.

Stumpy listened. She heard two men's voices, one of them Herbert's, in discussion for two or three minutes, until she began to be afraid that after all there were going to be difficulties about breaking the engagement at the cabaret.

When, after a while, Herbert returned, he said: "The affair is not going to be quite so simple as I thought. Your admirer, the accountant, is there in person. He is quite shirty; talks about action for damages, and what not. Says he must see you himself."

"Not me!" cried Stumpy, making as if to hide her head under the bed clothes in fear of a sudden irruption of the undesired guest.

Herbert told her to be easy in her mind.

"Put on your best bib and tucker," he said, "and get some breakfast. Meanwhile, I will go with this fellow to his office, and settle things with the manager in person. I shall be back in a jiffy, in an hour at most, and then we'll finish our talk."

He vanished once more, and a moment later the front door slammed.

Stumpy made for the bathroom, to wash off the remaining vestiges of her Siamese nationality.

She turned on the geyser, but did not even stop to look at the twenty blue-tongued flames.

As soon as she was dressed, she rang for Lina to

clear away the bedding from the sofa, and to bring breakfast.

While she was still eating, she heard the front door open. Her heart leaped. She knew that Gudrun must have returned. Even a lion tamer might have been frightened at what she had now to face.

Gudrun entered, but did not say a word to Stumpy, not even "Good morning." Silently she came up to the table, and laid down on it beside her sister's place a parcel wrapped in white paper and tied with golden cord—a parcel big enough to hold a pound of chocolates. In fact, it looked just like one of the parcels made up at the Lüdicke's sweet shop. Before Stumpy could pluck up heart to enquire what this meant, Gudrun had vanished.

Stumpy untied the gold cord, and, when she opened the paper wrapping, she did actually find one of Papa's trade boxes—one of those always used for sending out a pound of sweets. And, by the feel of the box, a pound of sweets was what it contained!

"Has Gudrun gone crazy?" thought Stumpy. All the Lüdickes were agreed in their loathing for sweetmeats!

But when she opened the box it was to find, not chocolate creams, but some lovely red roses, such as would cost two or three marks a piece this Novembertide.

But roses alone could not weigh so heavy.

Lifting out the roses, Stumpy found beneath them, at the bottom of the box, wrapped in Papa's finest gold paper, a weighty little package, whose contents clinked as she took it out. Inside there was. . . .

What?

What else than the two much-loved keys which admitted to Fritz's rooms.

"Gudrun! Gudrun! Darling, darling Gudrun!"

Thus exclaiming, Stumpy ran upstairs to the bedroom.

Gudrun was sitting on her bed, arms crossed on her breast, and looking into vacancy like a clairvoyante; but through the cherubic expression of her face, there still peeped something of the old mischievous smile.

"Oh, Gudrun, Gudrun! I'm so sorry! I had thought you such a beast!"

Stumpy put her arms round her sister's neck, and Gudrun stroked Stumpy's forehead in the old loving way which always did the younger sister so much good.

"Thought me a beast, did you?" said Gudrun. "Well, I have been rather a beast, you know. One is apt to be a beast when one wants something awfully, and can only get it by taking it away from someone else. But you've got him back again now, with God's and my gracious help."

"How on earth did you find out?" enquired Stumpy, who could not yet make head or tail of the matter.

"When I went to see him yesterday, I found the program on his table. As soon as he told me he wanted to go and see your performance, I had plenty to think about. I couldn't sleep the whole night, but when I heard Herbert come in at five and you weren't with him, I got up and kept watch. You didn't turn up until half-past five, and naturally I guessed where you had been. Still, to make sure, I went to see Fritz this morning. Then he told me. Well, darling, I've lost the game—and serves me right!"

"Of course it really does serve her right," thought Stumpy; but, being genuinely sorry for Gudrun, she asked: "What do you mean by 'serves you right'?"

"It serves me right because I've been nothing but

a silly idiot all along. Obviously I was an idiot to help you to get rid of your old Gerberding, seeing that if you had gone off to Argentina I would certainly have got Fritz for myself in the end. But I couldn't simply play for my own hand, I was too fond of you to do that. And then, quite apart from my feeling for you, I made such a silly of myself in my attitude towards him! I played the lovelorn maiden because I thought I should please him in that rôle! I was afraid just to stretch out my hands and take him. As long as I was sitting with him, I simply sweated virtue at every pore—to curse myself for a ninny as soon as I was alone. It was positively sickening! Just as if we had still been living in the nineteenth century! Still, I won't go on railing like a fishwife, for I've got at least one good thing out of the affair. I used to think that I should get on all right with my art even though I continued to saunter through life and to dally with all and sundry; I had never learned how to work. I know better now! Men may come nosing around me as much as they please, but I shan't let one of them lay a finger on me. Not until I have blossomed out as a fully fledged artist! Then of course, I shall be able to slacken the curb chain a little. Well, in the end, it's this Fritz of yours that I have to thank for teaching me the lesson. He's got something to thank me for too! If he's managed, at last, to shake himself free from Elinor Schmitz, it's because I've made him able to!"

"Just as I fancied," thought Stumpy. But, since she rather envied Gudrun on this account, she was content to say: "Is that really so? But you know why he engaged himself to her? What he wants more than anything else in the world is to get back Nadolnien. That

is why he sacrificed himself to her, and why he was so loath to break the engagement. Did he never tell you about Nadolnien?"

Gudrun nodded. "Oh, yes, he spoke about Nadolnien, but always with some reserve. He used to speak vaguely of a duty which was absolutely incumbent on him, but it was not easy to make out exactly what he meant."

"I wonder what he did mean?" enquired Stumpy.

"Little stupid!" said Gudrun with a laugh. "How do we girls get hold of a man most easily? A man of the right sort, I mean—for the others would simply laugh in our faces. We do it by making them believe that when, one fine day, we have given ourselves to them, they have put themselves irrevocably in our debt—that they owe us eternal fidelity, care for our future, a joint domestic life, and even (in earlier days, when the duel was still in fashion) life itself. I'm positive that is what had happened between him and Elinor. And then when a formal engagement followed, he felt there was no longer any hope of escaping her."

"Well, then, how did you manage to save him from the wretch?" asked Stumpy, forgetting that "the wretch" was after all about to become her own sister-in-law.

Gudrun shrugged her shoulders and smiled significantly.

"There are all kinds of little things, scarcely noticeable things," she replied, "in which a woman's instinct can guide her rightly, according as to whether she wants to bind two people more closely together or to drive them apart. Then I always had Herr Samuel in reserve. I am still on excellent terms with him, for I make a point of never quarrelling with any one, even

when I've had to give him a rebuff. Of course, I could not ask him to give me Nadolnien as a present, but you can take it from me that he will be delighted to find any reasonable way of giving it back into Fritz's hands . . . But tell me, Stumpy dear, what have you got to offer Fritz in place of Nadolnien?"

Stumpy was dumbfounded, and did not know what to say. Never in her life had she felt so small, so poor, so pitiful. Yes, it was true, she would go to Fritz with empty hands, and, at the best, their joint lot would be to grow old without hope of advancement, to be forever and a day the servants of a stranger.

There was only one thought to comfort her in her despair. Surely Herbert must have something up his sleeve. Otherwise, why should he have reminded her of that agreement of theirs, that the first to make a good match would help the other.

As this thought crossed her mind, Herbert entered.

"I had a rough time of it," he said, as he came in. "The beggars would have liked to scalp me or skin me alive, but I managed to make them see reason in the end. Well, that's over and done with."

His eyes wandered to his elder sister, and he said:

"Excuse me, Gudrun, but would you mind clearing out for a little? My room won't be done yet, and I've something private to talk over with Stumpy—you'll hear about it in due course."

Gudrun nodded indifferently, and went into the front room, from which a moment later came the sound of the piano.

"Where had we got to, Stumpy?" he began. "Oh, I remember! What I wanted to say was that if you and your Fritz come to terms with Herr Samuel, there is one piece of advice I should like to give you. When you are drawing up a contract, don't forget to put in a

paragraph giving you an option of purchase. Get that phrase fixed in your mind, 'option of purchase.' It would be better still if you would have a clause stating the actual price at which you will be able to buy. Unless you do that, you will find that the more work Fritz puts into the place, the more he improves the estate—the more you will have to pay for it in the end."

"What's the use of that?" said Stumpy gloomily. "We're never likely to have enough money to buy the place."

"Who can tell?" said Herbert, with the same meaning smile as before. "There's a certain lady of my acquaintance who has an irrepressible desire to give your Fritz a very respectable sum of money in compensation, and she has only refrained from mentioning the matter because she has been afraid of having a plate or some such article broken over her head. Besides, though he is as poor as a church mouse, during all these months of his engagement he has been shouldering the joint expenses whenever they went out to supper and so on. If I mention these little things, without actually totting up the cost of all the cutlets and the cocktails and the bottles of Roederer he has footed the bill for in the course of this time . . ."

"I know he has had to sell his family plate," broke in Stumpy. Whether this was literally true or not, the statement came in handy.

". . . it is because I think it likely," continued Herbert, "that she will very soon feel disposed to recoup him by a loan bearing no interest."

Stumpy could hardly understand, or could not dare to understand. Her happiness was too great to realise. Another source of delight was this, that Gudrun, who had hoped to make Herr Samuel complaisant, would

not be called upon to do this. Stumpy would come off victress, without being indebted to Gudrun at all.

Not knowing how better to show her gratitude to Herbert, she clasped his hands and pressed them passionately to her eyes.

He laughingly accepted the caress, and went on: "The great danger is that your Fritz, with his antediluvian views, may raise some foolish objection, so we must manage the affair among ourselves without consulting him. Elinor will give the money to me, and I shall give it to you, and you can do what you like with it."

At this, Stumpy could no longer contain herself. She flung herself on the bed, pressed her face into the pillow, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Howl away, darling, howl away!" said Herbert, getting up. "While you are working off your feelings, I shall seek a more peaceful clime. Would you like me to convey your respects to my re-affianced?"

Stumpy sprang up with a start.

"No! No!" she cried involuntarily. But then, when she remembered how much she was going to be indebted to her future sister-in-law, she changed her note, and said:

"Yes, do, please!"

"Don't put too much affection into 'it, all the same!" said Herbert. "Fräulein Elinor Schmitz is not a proper object for anything of that sort. Between her and me, it's simply a matter of calculation. She has money, and I relieve her of some of it until I can earn some more for her. You see, there's nothing immoral about it after all! Haven't I always told you, Stumpy, that I should make the running in the end?"

Chapter Twenty-seven

THE SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY

STUMPY's birthday had come round once more.

The seventeenth. Actually, of course, the eighteenth, if we count in the real birth-day as the first birthday. But we will stick to the usual way of reckoning, and call it the seventeenth.

The table bearing the presents was not so richly furnished this year as it had been the year before.

Yesterday Mamma had said: "My dear child, we have incurred such heavy expenses through your engagement which was broken off and through that foolish idea you had of becoming a dancer, that we must draw in our horns a little."

As regards the dancing, the only loss to the Lüdicke household had been that Stumpy had not paid her mother anything for board during the month of September—but since her parents had never heard a word about her wonderfully successful début, a certain amount of natural irritation had remained in their minds.

All the same, round the seventeen candles and the flame of life in the middle, there were laid out some presents well worth looking at. Three pairs of winter stockings (wool and silk); a Tutenkamen jumper; a vanity bag, embroidered by Frau Olden, the artist, with her own fingers.

But Stumpy seemed indifferent to these splendours, and would hardly notice them. She said of each pres-

ent: "Oh, lovely, lovely," but it was obvious that her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Positively ungrateful," murmured Mamma.

It seemed to her that Herbert, likewise, and Gudrun, were behaving strangely.

Herbert, who a year back had given Stumpy that wonderful pink and violet pair of suspenders, had not provided a present at all on this occasion; and when Mamma had asked him why, he had been even more enigmatic than usual, and, with a gesture vaguely indicating the pocket where he carried his notecase, he had said: "All in good time."

Gudrun sat in the window seat, looking absently into the street, and behaving as if what was going on was not in the least a concern of hers. As a present from her, there were five red roses on the birthday table. But they were withered blooms. Of course they were withered, for it was a great many days since she had given them to her sister. Even though Stumpy had said: "These roses are the most lovely of all my birthday presents," Mamma did not consider the gift worthy of a loving sister.

The clock showed that it was ten minutes to nine, and Papa and Mamma were making ready for their daily duties in the shop, when suddenly the front door bell sounded.

Well, there was nothing wonderful about that on a birthday morning. No doubt Willi and Kurt and Hans Joachim, Stumpy's old companions, were going to send some flowers as usual.

But the behavior of the three young folk was astonishing. At the sound of the bell, Gudrun started as if she had been stung by a wasp. Stumpy turned pale, and staggered against the wall. Even Herbert, whose pose was imperturbability, pricked up his ears.

"What on earth is the matter with you all?" enquired Mamma with some acerbity.

As for Papa, who was fond of his little jokes, he stroked his chin and said: "If it were not that Herr Gerberding has sailed for Buenos Aires long since, one might fancy that your last year's prophecy had come true, Herbert, and that the ringer of that bell was a suitor for Stumpy's hand!"

They all heard Lina go to the front door.

A masculine voice was heard in the hall.

Then the door of the room opened—and what happened next must be left to the reader's imagination.

THE END

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